Trails: First Generation

Volcano

Pair 1, Book 2

Gail Brown

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Dreaming science fiction was something that happened soon after reading my first science fiction book. For years, I wanted to write some. I once had a novel started, although, I never finished and lost the story decade ago.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

Chapter 1

Los Alamos, New Mexico and University of Arizona

Amber grabbed the phone as it buzzed like a beehive. A text icon blinked on the screen.

She closed her eyes before opening the screen. There were only two people she wanted to hear from. Maybe a third.

The message opened. "Safe. Scared. Send dad home. Can't reach him. Please come."

Tears rolled down Amber's cheeks. Tears of joy that her best friend Karen was safe. And tears of fear as her mom and Brandon were still among the millions missing.

Her thumbs twitched as she struggled to form a coherent answer.

"Who is it?" Alex asked.

"Karen." Amber dropped the phone to her lap. "What do I say?"

"Ask her where she is before you lose connection. We need her," Alex said.

"Where are you?" Amber typed and hit send.

"The lab. It's empty. Jerry died saving me. Where is everyone?"

Alex glanced over her shoulder. "Tell her to stay put. We need the equipment, and her, when your mom finds Brandon."

Amber typed to Karen. Then she looked up at Alex. "Do you think we'll find them?"

He hugged her close and whispered in her ear. "One way, or another."

Amber pulled away and waited on Karen's reply.

The office door creaked open.

"Thought I'd find you two here. Any news?" Dr. Rebecca asked.

"Karen's alive, and at Parkfield research center. We have to rescue her." Amber gripped her phone.

Dr. Rebecca rubbed her hands through her hair.

"Dad already said we need the equipment from there. Can we get clearance to join on retrieving it?" Alex rested his hand on her shoulder.

"I actually intended to send you both to a meeting at a bio lab," Dr. Rebecca said.

"What help could we be there? I don't know anything about biology." Especially after last month's uncertainty of the animals they might meet on Magdalena Peak.

Dr. Rebecca laughed. "You don't need to know anything really. They need your knowledge of where the faults are splitting, and Alex's knowledge of the magma plumes. Will you go?"

"When and where?" At least it would keep her mind busy, while waiting to hear if her mom and Brandon were safe.

"University of Arizona. Gina will be piloting both of you. With so much shattered infrastructure, we don't dare risk the time, or road hazards, of driving such a distance." Dr. Rebecca sat down at an empty table and pulled out her phone.

At least there wouldn't be anything to pack. Amber's backpack sat on the chair beside her ready to go at a moment's notice. In fact, it was never far away anymore. Quakes occurred daily, almost hourly now. She turned to the laptop. This morning, a 3.6 in the San Andrea's wouldn't have done any damage, if it hadn't been for the 8.5 a month ago, and dozens more of varying strength since then. Other than Karen's frantic call, it seemed all connection with the majority of California had been cut off for over a week.

"I'll call dad," Alex said.

Before long, Gina knocked on the door. "Ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Amber accepted the earplugs Gina dangled in front of her. She'd rather rescue Karen than go someplace and repeat the nightmare of the last month plus. Surely, these biologists in Arizona knew as much as she did about what was going on. After all, the ground quaked and rifted everywhere. Even if the satellites were able to collect the information of all the quakes, there weren't many remaining stations with power to download it all.

When they reached the campus, Gina sat the helicopter down in an open space near a building. She turned it off and waited for the blades to stop turning.

Two women and a man walked toward them and greeted them.

"General Nord called a moment ago. He needs you to refuel and go on to Parkfield as soon as possible." Dr. Cora Jonas held out her hand.

"Good," Amber said.

"I'll refuel, and be back." Gina returned to the helicopter.

The blades turned slowly, and picked up speed before Gina lifted off to fly to the nearest base.

Dr. Emily Barkley turned to Amber. "I'm the lead scientist here. It's bad isn't it?"

Alex nodded. "Evacuations were successful, unless Amber's prediction happens. Then, nowhere is safe. Plate movement is unpredictable. We have tried to convince the military to stabilize their weapons storage areas."

"We have weapons here to. Some even more dangerous, as they can't be seen. What do you recommend?" Dr. Barkley looked from one to the other of them.

"What weapons do you have?" A university shouldn't have weapons of any sort.

"Come on, I'll show you." Dr. Barkley pulled a large heavy door open.

She led them inside what appeared to be a four-story building. Inside, a window lit stairwell led multiple stories underground, as well as up three floors. Their guide led them up a flight of stairs, and down a long, dark, narrow hall. She stopped at a door that required an electronic pass card for entry. Without a struggle, the scientist uncovered the battery panel, and unlocked the door.

Sunshine streamed in through small windows above the cabinets. Locked cabinets lined the walls. Poles were positioned near several red cabinets with chemical placards pasted on them.

"Second floor to avoid floods, unlikely as they are in Tucson. These cabinets contain enough materials to start a toxic biological war, with no end in sight. Many of these superbugs have no known antidote. Or, they are antibiotic resistant. And with most pharmacies closed due to power loss, even if an antidote exists, few people could receive it." She shook her head and turned away.

Dr. Mark Marten walked to a red door at the end of the long room. "Back here, there are even more. And three additional levels of security. I can't even take you in there without high security clearance. General Nord said to tell you, not show you specifics." His hand jiggled the doorknob. The card reader blinked red.

"What are we to do with these? Here, and other parts of the country, have just as dangerous of materials." Dr. Marten's eyes gazed across the room.

Tables filled with lab equipment, beakers, test tubes, wires, and so many unusual glass and metal pieces, Amber couldn't name them all. A poster hung on the wall over one workstation. "Mistakes here can save lives elsewhere." Only, that might not be true anymore.

There wasn't much she or Alex could tell them. The continent was ripping apart under their feet. It wasn't known if the splits included Arizona, at the moment. There weren't enough seismologists to be everywhere. Arizona and all those other labs across the country were depending on her answer. Amber gulped and glanced at Alex. There might not be anywhere safe to send all of this material.

Alex stepped into a sunbeam. "It isn't easy to know. What can destroy them?"

"Some can be destroyed by heat. Others by cold. Some have no known way to be destroyed." Dr. Barkley moved a folder and leaned against a work station.

"If we bury them deep in the ground, will they be able to escape? They would contaminate the soil and water if they did." Amber's hands shook. A quake or volcanic eruption could bring them back to the surface, possibly spreading them faster than they ever had before. Without antidotes, millions more people, and animals, would die.

Dr. Marten sighed. "I was afraid you might not have an answer. We have to hope. I recommend we send them to the somewhere similar to the Svalbard seed vault. The hazardous vault wouldn't need much space. Governments are trying to fill Svalbard with seeds and plant starts in case of worldwide disaster. There's even been talk of frozen animal and human embryos being stored there."

Amber pulled away from Alex. "That would work. Store the biohazards there, in the deep freeze. Distribute the seeds around the world. We'll even take some ourselves to share around. Are there other places where the embryos can be stored?"

"I think they've already sent the embryos there. They require special treatment. We could send the biological hazards to a few

other similar government type facilities. There's one in Colorado, the Cheyenne Mountain."

Amber closed her eyes. Too close to Yellowstone. If the mountains collapsed, maybe they would not escape. "A last resort. Yellowstone is a danger."

"Is anywhere not a danger?" Dr. Marten asked.

Anywhere could be dangerous. "What about salt mines for extra seeds and anything else? If the mountains have sealable vaults, it might work to send your weapons there."

Alex leaned against a counter. "That sounds good. Seeds can save us all."

"Wouldn't work," Dr. Barkley said. "Too few people know how to farm anymore, and we don't know what the climate may be like next year."

"Sure we do," Amber said. "If Yellowstone erupts, we will be in permanent winter for years. We can transfer both colder climate seeds and regular climate seeds to many places, and share books, both in print, and on computer disk, so people can learn to grow what should grow in their area. It'll keep people from panicking as they await the inevitable."

"You think the military would allow fuel use for the project?"

Alex glanced at the room of equipment and rubbed his healed arm. "I think so. We can ask General Nord. Are they already rationing fuel for your projects too?"

Dr. Barkley nodded. "That's why we called for your help. It isn't much. Maybe a few loads back and forth will complete the projects. We aren't sure how much longer the other research facilities will have power, or working internet. It may be our only answer."

Helicopter blades whirred outside. Gina was back. She wouldn't be able to wait on them.

"Thanks." Dr. Barkley's face was long and pale.

"Stay safe," Amber said.

The woman laughed dryly as she picked up a red hazardous waste pail. "We've a lot of work do."

Amber and Alex ran down the stairs and out the door to the waiting helicopter.

Before long, they'd be able to see Karen. Jerry was just a memory now. Karen could come back with her, and be by her side so her numerical mistakes would be caught whenever they

calculated notes on the computer. As long as they had working computers. Her throat tightened at the memory of what she would have to do though.

Karen still didn't know her father was missing.

The helicopter soared west.

The countryside flowed under the noisy helicopter, and she could only wish they could have taken it to search for her mom and Brandon as easily. Perhaps General Nord would give them the opportunity when they returned.

Chapter 2

From University of Arizona to Long Valley Caldera and Parkfield, California

A mountain range covered the horizon. Alex gulped. Long Valley caldera, one of the supervolcanoes, would be outside their direct path. If it were venting, they needed to know. Before they reached Parkfield.

"Gina, do we have enough fuel to check Long Valley?" Even if he didn't really want to see it, they had to know if California was going to be rattled by a line of volcanoes to the east, as well as the west. If the San Andreas, and associated faults, ruptured down the middle, the parts of California that survived would become an island surrounded by fiery seas.

"Enough fuel for a flyby. We can't stop though. No telling how active the region is. With so many stations knocked offline, we don't know what's really happening here." Gina turned the helicopter toward the north.

His dad would be expecting them to arrive at Parkfield. Tom would be with him. So much had changed since he had seen both of them. Now, he could joke with his dad about volcano injuries. Alex's arm had healed now, with only an occasional slight pain. His dad's injuries would never heal. A re-injury to his arm could leave him in the same predicament. Especially with medical care being even more rare now.

"Gina, please call dad, and tell him we'll be late," Alex said. She would be able to contact them through her headset. The rest of them wouldn't hear the conversation, because of the noise in the helicopter.

Amber's knee brushed his as she surveyed the scenery below them. She had said almost nothing on this flight. Normally, he would have expected her to talk about all the science happening under their feet. While he had felt at home in the biology lab, she had been nervous. The pressure of recent events bubbled to the top of his emotions, and likely hers as well.

Below them, mists, or perhaps steam, drifted over the mountains. A late afternoon cloud haze created a blurry maze of trees. Amber grabbed his hand and pointed. One peak was on fire. People waved burning tree limbs for help.

He stared at them. It reminded him of the night on Magdalena Peak. Guide ended up with a broken leg. Livia's broken ankle, and Corbo by her side. Amber tended to them all, and tenderly touched his broken arm. The memory sent a rush of warmth up his spine. Amber wasn't so caring tonight.

Gina couldn't stop. There wouldn't be room for anyone not already scheduled on this mission. Leaving them to their fate would result in their deaths. Not that anyone could do anything about it. Those people should have evacuated months ago. Though where to, Alex wasn't sure.

Beyond the fire, more trees blazed on a distant mountain top. It could be a campfire gone wrong. Someone not used to living on the edge who had survived the quakes, and might die at their own hand. He shielded his eyes, searching for signs of people. No one in sight.

"Almost there," Gina said. "Beyond this smoke column."

Amber squeezed his hand. "It can't be worse than what we've already seen."

Slivers of a large lake glistened in the evening sunshine. Plumes of smoke from countless fumaroles spiraled into the sky beyond. The ground seethed with hot springs, water, and lava vying for the same channels through the land.

Beyond, more mountains, and more lakes, would look the same. No time, or safe place, to stop to take measurements. If only he had thought of strapping a COSPEC to the outside of the helicopter, he might have been able to collect some useful readings.

Gina turned back southeast and dashed for Parkfield. It would be nearly dark when they arrived. Flaming mountains, and worried biologists in Arizona. Lost in thought was easier than talking through headsets.

Hopefully, all the biological weapons in California were already buried somewhere safe. The plan was a quick rescue of Karen and equipment, and then a hasty retreat to somewhere safe before California smashed itself to pieces around them.

No lights were on at Parkfield. Equipment littered the ground by tumbled building blocks. Two other parked helicopters with stilled blades rested almost outside the rubble. A few people stood near a door surrounding a roofless, rubble filled space.

When Gina nodded, Alex and Amber climbed down from the helicopter.

Amber raced to the young woman standing alone who must be Karen. She hugged her and cried. Though their mouths moved, Alex couldn't hear the words.

Tom hurried over, arms loaded with equipment, "We were wondering if you would arrive before dark. Hoped you hadn't gone down in the mountains."

"We're okay. We saw Long Valley. Where's dad?"

"Around the corner. You have a few minutes before we leave."

"Food, and few minutes without vibration," Alex said. "I won't be able to walk right for weeks."

Tom laughed as he and a two other pilots stacked equipment into the helicopter.

Gina supervised the load.

His dad rested on a broken block in the shade. A small red box rested on his knee, and his fingers caressed the lid.

"Dad?"

His dad tapped the lid. "Hi son. Going to entrust this to you."

Alex sat beside his dad and pulled out a granola bar. "What is it?"

"Plastic eating bacteria. Sadly, we don't know if there will be any consequences. The president has ordered adding some to every landfill we can find. We hope it won't make a larger catastrophe. People have already done so much else wrong to this planet."

"This destruction goes beyond anything that's our fault." Alex nibbled the last bite. Not a meal. He needed real food, and soon. Handling bacteria while eating didn't seem like a good idea.

"It's the president's orders to try to erase as much of the damage we have done as we can. I'm going with the group to see the remains of Hawaii, and add bacteria to the garbage patch swept off the island, to try to save the marine life for my grandchildren." His dad touched Alex's hand.

"I can't walk and explore like you can. This I can do. Stay safe." His dad squeezed his hand.

"You want me to take some back?"

His dad nodded. "General Nord has asked that you and Amber go directly to Oklahoma. After I visit the Pacific Garbage Patches, I'm going to Yellowstone."

"Dad, don't go there."

"I have to." His dad squeezed his hand. "Someone has to document it for future generations. The internet is barely working, so we can't rely on it."

"Alex, it's time to go." Amber's hands clutched at her waist as tears dripped down her cheek.

"Take this." Alex's dad handed him the red box. "I hope to see you again. She's pretty. Tom will help me up."

Alex turned away. His dad didn't want him to see how bad his knee was.

Amber took his hand and led him back to the helicopter. Her fist was clenched against her face.

"Where's Karen?"

"She's going with Tom. Karen's." Amber looked away and refused to speak.

Alex sighed. Amber was an enigma. So happy at times. Too silent at others. Whatever had happened couldn't be good. He tried to take her hand and she pulled away.

He slid into the seat beside her and placed the red box at his feet. What it contained could remove plastics from landfills, and their lives forever. The unknown, unintended effects, could devastate in unexpected ways. It was dangerous to mess with nature. Nature had a habit of striking back, and trying to maintain balance, something people often forgot.

Gina lifted off. "We'll be stopping for fuel. The trek over the mountains is too much. Have to keep the load light though, so we can make it over easily."

Alex nodded and dozed as the vibration took over.

The pit stop didn't even give them time for a meal. At least a few women brought trays of food to them on the rooftop refueling station.

Gina pulled away.

Several women in dresses stood near the edge of the building. They raised their arms and screamed.

Jumping off, their skirts billowed up around their faces. Images of umbrellas will their hoops flipped inside out filled his mind as they raced away.

Alex gasped and grabbed Amber's hand.

The building crumbled down on top of the women.

Chapter 3

Little Italy Deli, New Mexico and Corbo's family

Livia touched her mother's hand. "We'll be fine. I'm going to stay with Corbo. He needs me."

Her mother wiped away her tears. "You are doing what I wish I had done all those years ago. Of course, then you wouldn't be here. Stay safe."

The door to the living quarters swung open and her dad walked into the restaurant with a backpack. "Can't save it all, can I wifey?"

Something about his tone of voice startled Livia. It sounded defeated.

"I've done all I can. I worked all these years so Livia would have this." He waved around the darkened restaurant. "No electricity for days. Inventory spoiled. I had to feed it to the coyotes. Now to be evacuated. Will the building even be here when, or if, we come back?"

Livia's mom rubbed her eyes and stood up. "We will manage, regardless." She took her husband's hand and pointed him to the door. "You'll lock up?"

"Yes. Corbo should be ready in a few minutes."

Her mother nodded and walked out the door with her head held high.

More tears would come. Without her and Corbo there to remind her every minute of Eduardo, she'd regain her strength and help from the background as she always had at the restaurant. In a few days, they'd be cooking and singing bad Italian songs at some refugee camp.

Livia smiled. No matter how awful the songs were, they'd never make the delicious food taste bad.

"Ready?" Corbo's large frame filled the door to the living quarters.

Livia pushed herself up from the seat beside the table. "Guess I won't push the chairs back in. They'll be waiting for Mom when she comes back." She pulled her backpack onto her good shoulder and grabbed her crutches.

"I can carry your backpack too."

"You'll be carrying the food my parents managed to save. Hopefully it won't spoil before we reach your Aunt Anna."

Her foot gingerly touched the ground. The fall on Magdalena Peak had done more damage than she had told anyone. The nurse at the Immi Clinic had said she'd be lucky if she ever walked without a limp. Amber had done an excellent job wrapping her leg. Without consistent medical treatment, the effects of the break could last a lifetime.

Corbo touched her arm.

Leaning against him, they walked out of the "Little Italy Deli."

She turned the key that locked the door to her childhood home. The alarm couldn't be set. If Amber had been right about Yellowstone, and everything else, neither her, nor her parents would ever return.

Without a backward glance, she followed Corbo to the vehicle General Nord had loaned them. An early solar prototype cart with enhanced abilities when electricity was available. Not normally street legal. However, with fuel being rationed, it would be safe for the short distance they had to travel.

Roads should have been smooth sailing with no traffic. Grass and weeds grew in the pavement cracks. Raggedy people with heavy loads stumbled along them to the evacuation gathering points. Reptiles dozed in the middle of the road, soaking up the sun's rays without danger of being ran over. Stray cows stood on the edges of the road and ate the knee-high grass that exhaust fumes normally kept short.

Corbo drove the struggling vehicle up to a tumbledown farmhouse with a broken porch. "It doesn’t look like much. They'll be in the tenant's house in back."

Livia gulped. If the main house looked destroyed, the place his Aunt Anna and family were staying had to be worse.

"Can you walk? It needs to recharge. Driving was too much this time."

"I guess I have to." She clutched her backpack.

He grinned at her. "I can carry you, and then come back for our belongings."

With so many desperate people on the roads? She didn't want to lose any of the few possessions she had kept. Gripping her

phone in her hand, she braced her teeth to put her foot on the ground.

"You came." His Aunt Anna faltered at the corner of the farmhouse. "Thank you."

"We are here to learn all you know about my parents. We can't stay." Corbo pulled his backpack onto his shoulder.

The woman nodded and wrung her hands. "Hand me your backpacks. Livia will need help." She fluttered around like a butterfly, lighting touching Livia and Corbo, their vehicle, and their backpacks.

Corbo settled her on a lawn couch, under a porch. He lifted her foot up on a box. A dilapidated house crumbled behind her. The outdoor living space in front of her pulsed with hope and possibility. On another couch nearby, Corbo's Uncle Jon reclined, his broken leg requiring him to rest, and not walk.

At her feet, Corbo tossed bits of dried grass in the air.

A barn cat reached for the sunshine as it slid across the porch.

"Will you stay here, please?" Aunt Anna said.

"Until Livia can walk, or we hear from General Nord. I asked for help before we left."

The only family he had ever known was quiet compared to her noisy dad. They barely spoke, not looking at one another. Words seemed to have failed them completely.

"What can you tell us about Adora?" Livia asked.

The woman turned to her. "My sister was beautiful. Wish I had a picture of her. We had nothing in Mexico. There had been hope when she fell in love. Pictures of their wedding day are somewhere. Or were."

A young man walked around the house and dropped the body of deer. "Corbo, you're home."

Corbo sat up. "Desi, it's great to see you again. Your tracking skills haven't suffered due to the earthquakes."

Desi laughed as he joined them. He sat next to Corbo, and glanced at Livia. "Animals are more skittish now. More deer near here foraging now that the grass grows again to hide them. Tell us about you."

Corbo glanced at her. His shoulders relaxed. "We have a little time. Livia has to heal more, and we need a better vehicle to travel."

Desi nodded. "You know if you leave again, I'll track you down."

Corbo laughed. "Go right ahead."

The banter between the two cousins relaxed Livia. Maybe there was hope. Even Corbo's Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon relaxed their stances and smiled as the young men chatted.

Leaning back, Livia adjusted her broken ankle. They had been told not to expect electricity, or fuel, no matter where they went. The tiny solar cart could only drive a few miles without a stop to recharge. Perhaps they could use the solar power to charge a cell phone and communicate, if any cell towers still had power.

Voices droned on. Heat blanketed her. She closed her eyes. Not a wise idea. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the river wash away her once friends. Nathan and Josie had fallen into the surge of water as if in a trance. None of the people had screamed or yelled.

After the flash of water down the Rio Grande, dead people were discovered all around the world. It made the news, equal in fear to the quakes. A few newscasters had asked if the deaths could have been caused by gasses released deep in the earth. Why in many places, two people had been talking, and only one died had never been explained. A few autopsies hadn't revealed anything unusual. In some places, whole communities had died. In others, nearly all survived.

Corbo shook her. "You okay? You whimpered."

"Every time I see them die, I think if only I had said, or done something different, they'd still be alive."

Corbo patted her shoulder. He had already said all the words he knew to say about what had happened on that day. There was nothing new to say, and nothing anyone could do to bring them back to life.

If she could walk, Livia would run away as fast as her legs could carry her to cry in peace somewhere alone. As it was, she could only grin and wait on the conversation to change.

Chapter 4

Corbo's family

If Livia's parents had stayed instead of evacuating, Corbo would rather have stayed there. Even if her father was loud, and glared at him. He'd had been glared at all his life by people who didn't understand him.

Her mother hadn't known much more about his father. She had known Eduardo longer than his Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon, whom he had thought were his parents. Corbo touched his head and groaned. He still hadn't called them anything since he returned for this visit. How would they react to being called "Mom" and "Dad" now that they knew he knew they weren't? He could call them "Aunt" and "Uncle," or by their first names. Nothing felt right.

He glanced at the woman he had called "Mom" for seventeen years. She hadn't called him by name either. Silence had been unheard of growing up. Today, no one spoke. Livia had tried to start a conversation, and it had fallen flat.

Desi entered the clearing with a deer. His tracker cousin he had always known as a brother. "Corbo, you're home."

Corbo smiled. "So good to see you."

Desi joined him and the talk turned to family.

"Where is everyone else?"

Desi glanced at his parents. "Didn't they tell you?"

"No. We haven't had much time to talk."

There had been time to talk, and so much to say. No one had spoken much; as if the weight of the truth kept them from even safer small talk.

Desi leaned back against the couch. "The girls left with the evacuation group two days ago. I don't think they will ever come back. Deep anger didn't have time to heal."

"I wish I could have seen them again." Corbo leaned back and placed his head in Livia's hands.

"It might have helped. If you showed enough anger. They've been more upset as time has passed." Desi watched the wispy clouds circling in the sky.

"They'll come. Won't leave Mom and Dad forever," Aunt Anna said.

"You lied to them, to us, and to Corbo," Desi said. "Did you lie to yourselves as well?"

"No time to talk about it now," Aunt Anna said.

"Now is the time." Desi crossed his arms and stared at his mother. "I want to know when you intended telling us the whole truth. And, when you planned to share Corbo's parent's information with him."

Aunt Anna had tears in her eyes. She tried to wipe them, and squirmed on the couch beside Uncle Jon.

Corbo allowed Desi to speak for him. To say what needed to be said by someone they might listen to as they had never listened to him. That had to stop now. He closed his eyes as he realized he had always let others speak for him. Even Livia had spoken for him many times. "What do you want me to call you now?"

Aunt Anna looked at him. "What do you want to call us?"

"He should call you liars!" Desi slammed his fist on the ground.

"Maybe you can help us find his dad." Livia rubbed Corbo's forehead.

"I've been looking. Brothers went to Arizona to find someone who might know more," Desi said.

"You took all my children from me," Aunt Anna said.

"No. You sent them away. Think about how they feel," Corbo said. "I don't blame them for going. Tell me what you can about my real parents."

"We raised. Best we could." Uncle Jon half sat up, panting from the exertion.

"Please help," Livia said. "Don't blame yourselves, or each other, for the past. We have to go on from here. Windy would expect us to."

Livia would think of Windy now. Yes, Windy would want them to go on, and soon.

"Dark soon, and Desi's deer," Aunt Anna said.

"Okay. Tomorrow we talk," Corbo said.

Desi stalked off and grabbed his deer to finish butchering it.

"So angry. All of them," Aunt Anna said.

"I'll talk to him. No guarantees." Maybe they would tell Livia something helpful when he wasn't there. Finding his father was all

that mattered now. Corbo had to find him before the ground swallowed him.

Livia patted his head.

It was almost sad that Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon had done this to themselves. Especially now, when their children might not be able to come back if they wanted to.

"Do you need anything?" He gazed up into Livia's eyes.

Livia shook her head and held her phone tight.

He walked over to the table where Desi stretched out the butchered bits of deer.

Desi kept working. "They claim they know nothing. They lost any papers in that fire after the girls were born. I don't believe it."

"We are still family."

Blood dripped from the knife as Desi raised it in the air. "I always looked up to you as my older brother. I wanted to be like you. They took that away."

Corbo choked back laughter. "You're a hunter and a provider. Me, I'm squeamish at the sight of blood."

Desi looked past him to the group on the patio. "How do we know Dad is really our father now? Mom may be our mom, or not. Remember the school picnics? People thought all of us siblings were unrelated friends. Who are any of us really?"

Corbo closed his eyes and shook his head. The world had seemed so simple all those years ago, as a young child. He opened his eyes and looked at Desi, only two years younger than him. "I remember most of her pregnancies and her talk of the coming babies. Your father hasn't changed."

Desi turned to him. "You don't remember before I was born?"

"I was a baby then."

Desi plunged the knife into the deer hide. "My brothers and sisters, if they are, left in disgust. They'll never come back."

"Aunt Anna is their mother, and Uncle Jon their father," Corbo said.

Desi turned to him, his eyes flashing. "Perhaps. She lied to all of us, all of our lives. She made him keep the lies. I'm the only hunter. I'm not his child."

Chapter 5

Parkfield, California to University of Arizona

Karen couldn't have done what she said. Amber clinched her fists as tears threatened to roll down her cheeks. Her best friend said she was pregnant, and Jerry was the father. She wouldn't face her own father if he was found, so she was going to the garbage patches and Yellowstone with Tom. It all seemed so impossible.

It had only been three months she had been away. So much had changed. Karen had cried as she turned away. Tom had pulled her close, and comforted her.

Amber had to find her mom and Brandon. They were her only family now, and all that mattered. She turned away from Alex and stared out the window. Faults didn't matter anymore. They were all so shattered that no map would even be remotely accurate. It would take generations to rebuild the knowledge that had been lost as the crust slipped and slid beneath their feet. She kicked a box, and didn't care what was in it.

"Don't spill it. It'll eat the bottom of the helicopter," Alex said.

"I don't care. How could she do this?"

"Tell me."

Amber recited what Karen had said. Even now, she knew it was no different in many ways, from what Karen must have planned all along. Trying to fit in, she'd do what others wanted her to do. So much knowledge and ability thrown away on a dead boy.

"We are going to stop back by lab," Gina said.

"Do we have too?" Amber asked.

"General Nord said too. We are taking much of their plastic eating bacteria, and another type that shows promise of cleaning up oil spills. Dr. Rebecca expects the oil rigs to tumble if any more big quakes occur." Gina changed the helicopter's path.

Before long, they reached the buildings they had left behind that morning. It was dark, well into the night.

Dr. Emily Barkley dragged a cart filled with boxes out of the building. "We've had deformation here too."

Amber could barely make out what she said over the noise from the helicopter's blades.

The woman handed the red biohazard boxes to Alex, and he stacked them where Gina pointed.

Dr. Barkley held her thumbs up, and dragged the cart back to the building. It would be a long night in the air, and they were all tired. She dozed under the hum of the blades. She didn't even remember reaching the base, or leaving the helicopter.

Morning came, and Dr. Rebecca shook her arm to wake her. "We have a lot of work to do today."

Amber stretched out on the cot. "What's up for today?"

Dr. Rebecca sat beside her on the floor. "Windy's friend Champ and I are going to the Gulf Coast to visit the oil rigs, then on to the New Madrid faults. Several seismometers have been thrown offline there. I wanted to say goodbye in person."

Amber sat up. "What? Are you leaving me here?"

With a shake of her head, and a pat on Amber's leg, Dr. Rebecca turned to the door. "No. You and Alex will go to a landfill in Santa Fe and release some of the plastic eating bacteria. Then, on to Oklahoma to do the same. Also, the major libraries in New Mexico will be evacuated. If any survival manuals are still in their collections, they will be given to town leaders."

"I can't do it all," Amber said. "I need to find mom and Brandon."

Dr. Rebecca handed her a cloth wrapped package. "You will, I think. We downloaded all the useful data we could find, to save it for future generations. If Yellowstone blows, major food growing regions will be barren next year. Famine will come. Try to stall what you can." Dr. Rebecca stood up and walked out the door.

Amber pulled her backpack closer. The Ring of Fire pillowcase spilled out into her lap. The only connection left with her family. A tear dropped on the mark for Kilauea. She brushed it away and tucked the pillowcase and package near the bottom of the backpack.

A knock at the open door startled her. "Ready to go?" Alex stood, half framed in the door.

How long had he been watching her? She gulped. He treated her well at least, far better than Jerry had treated Karen. Other than holding her hand, and holding her near in times of stress, he hadn't pushed his true feelings on her. Enough for her to know they were there. "A minute." Amber tucked the blanket on her bed. Not that it

mattered, they wouldn't be back. She picked up her backpack and walked to the door.

"Gina's waiting on us in the cafeteria," Alex said.

"Did she rest? I know she had to meet with General Nord, and that's never a short meeting." Amber pulled the strap tight over her shoulder.

Alex nodded. "It's almost midday." He placed his good hand against the wall.

She took a deep breath. Unusual for him to do that.

"Gina is going to officially invite us to her wedding. She thinks we are a couple, and I didn't respond to that statement earlier. If you don't want to go, or don't want us to go as a couple, you need to clear it up with her when she asks. I didn't want to deny anything, not knowing your feelings." He stared deep in her eyes.

She couldn't respond to that request. Right now, she had lost all the family she had ever known. Even Dr. Rebecca had said goodbye. "We can go as friends, if you want to," Amber said.

Alex relaxed. "Good. Cause I don't think we have a choice, since one of the stops is her family's ranch so she can be married. I think many people are afraid right now, and rushing into things. No need for us to as well." He touched her shoulder, and then opened the cafeteria door.

A few hours later, they arrived at the Santa Fe landfill. A manager came out to meet them at the helicopter. "Before you start, I'll need to ask questions."

"I'll try to answer them," Amber said. "I'm not well versed on biochemistry."

The man put his hand to his head. "Do we know any after affects?"

"You'd have to ask other scientists," Amber said.

"What about holes in the landfills, will they cause collapses over time as they eat the plastic?"

Amber closed her eyes. The consequences, intended and unintended were unknown to her, and from what many had said, the biochemists. "I don't have the answers. Gina can give you the contact information of the scientists. According to General Nord's request, we are to find a pile of plastic, and release a tablespoon of the bacteria solution. That's all I know."

She shouldered her bag and walked past the man. He was doing his job, as she was doing hers. Her throat tightened. Amber kept moving. A stack of plastic crates was piled at the entrance to one of the garbage pits. The container in her hand held several doses of plastic eating bacteria.

A few drops, and the first batch would begin to work. How long it would take, she didn't know.

"Let's unbury some over there," Alex said. "We can then rebury it, and maybe it will work faster."

"I don't want to dig in garbage," Amber said.

"You dig in faults, not much different, is it?" He laughed.

She giggled. "The archeology students once said something like that. They dig in ancient garbage. Modern garbage may be full of germs though, more dangerous to us than this bacteria." The glass tube glistened in the sun.

"There's a stick over there, we have to uncover something." Within moments, he had uncovered part of a plastic storage tub. A perfect candidate.

She dribbled some solution onto it.

Alex covered it back up with loose garbage before the sun could dry it. "Any more here?"

"Let's choose a third batch, further from the entrance." Amber tripped and slid across the dumping grounds of the large city. So much thrown away. Electronics, tattered clothing, and piles of rotting food teetered as wild animals searched through it. Too much damage to the environment. Mother Nature would have to work to repair herself after the devastation stopped. Or, maybe that was what she was doing. Preparing to recover her life.

They tramped through the garbage, scattered rats, mice, and gulls. A few stray dogs ran past her carrying bones with meat still clinging to them. She stepped on one bag, thinking it was sturdy, as it looked full. Her feet slipped, and her bottom landed on wet cardboard box. What is was wet from, she didn't want to think about.

Alex offered his hand to help her up.

In such an awkward position, it would be cruel to Alex to not accept his help. She reached out, and let him pull her up. Her hand stayed in his. They would either both remain upright together, or

both fall. His broken arm still bothered him at times. He might need the help as much, or more than her.

With a third batch of plastic eating bacteria released, Amber and Alex turned back to Gina at the helicopter.

"Where are going now?" Amber tromped through the garbage.

"Not sure. Looks like the manager is still arguing with Gina." Alex point to the red-faced man gesturing at the helicopter.

Amber wanted to run to Gina. The landfill was too unsteady. As wobbly as a fault line during a quake.

Chapter 6

Santa Fe Landfill to Longdale, Oklahoma

Alex struggled with his emotions. He wanted to pull Amber close and protect her from her fear of losing everyone she knew. After all, he was feeling the same thing. Seeing Tom take charge of Karen hadn't been any easier on him than Amber. She was taking it painfully, and rejecting those around her reaching out to her. He'd seen his dad do the same after his mom died.

In time, he hoped to see her smile again. If she didn't push him too far away, he'd do nearly anything to see that smile light up her face. No young woman, barely eighteen, deserved the trauma of the last few months. She took it so much to heart.

The tumble in the landfill had been a hopeful turning point. Almost afraid of the rejection, he reached out anyway. With his eyes closed, he felt her hand take his. At least she'd accepted his help when she needed it, for a moment anyway.

Gina hurried them back onto the helicopter. "He said the ground here was too unsteady for you two to go far. Amber you okay after that tumble?"

"I'm okay," Amber said.

Her voice didn't sound so sure. It was weak, and she had let go of his hand the moment they reached sturdy ground.

"We'll be stopping for fuel, if we can find any. You can clean up then. Food and fuel rations, even on military expeditions now. I don't want to walk the rest of the way home. I will, if I have to. I have to know my family is safe. And I'm sure everyone else feels the same way." Gina turned on the helicopter.

If only Amber had a friend she trusted here. If Livia hadn't disappeared with Corbo, she might have been able to tease or prompt Amber into better spirits. Where were they anyway?

Alex didn't reach out. He placed his hand on the seat between them, palm up, in hopes she would at least speak through the headphones. Of course, Gina would hear anything she said.

Amber closed her eyes as they flew on across New Mexico to Oklahoma.

"I think we're over Texas now," Alex said.

She glanced up. "Sorry. I thought my mom would be around a few more decades anyway. She'll miss so much of my life. I know it's selfish, as everyone is going through the same thing."

"You have a few friends left to reach out to. Perhaps we can find Livia and Corbo. They know this region far more than we do."

A smiled played at the corner of her lip. "I think they have their own worries now. I need to grieve a bit."

"And so do I," Alex said. The thought of what his dad was doing left a deep dread in the pit of his stomach. In fact, there was a far better chance of Amber seeing her mom again, than him seeing his dad.

Amber kicked the box beside her.

He sighed. If only she'd be more open.

"I've checked two places. We have to stop for fuel at the next one. No options." Gina turned to Alex. "I'm worried. The refineries have been offline for over a month now. No fuel is coming into the country. My job won't exist without it."

Gina touched down on the platform. "Don't go far. They are bringing us food. I'll show you good home cooking soon."

Alex and Amber stepped down to the pavement beside the helicopter. His legs wobbled from the vibrations. Even his arm ached from it. He rubbed it. Arthritis would set in at some point, and he'd be able to predict the weather. That might be valued in a future without weathercasters.

"Where you off to?" The man in charge of refueling glanced at her.

"Do you need to know?" Gina asked.

"Strict rations require only the maximum fuel to reach a destination."

Gina's eyes closed. She gave the location and turned to the building to take a restroom break.

"Come on," Alex said. "We don't have much time."

"About fifteen minutes." The refueler glanced back. "Take as long as you need."

As soon as Alex was back outside, he pulled out his phone. Livia's number was there in the memory somewhere, if the last battery drain didn't erase it. He scrolled through, and found it.

His phone showed no bars of connectivity. Perhaps a text would come through. It had to be quick. Amber and Gina were talking on the other side of the door.

"Livia, it's Alex. Where are you?" He tapped his foot and waited. Even if it went through now, it might be hours, or days, before she read it.

Amber and Gina walked out the door.

"Any news?" Alex asked.

Amber's eyes were big, and her face pink. What had happened now?

"The President was on a plane, and it didn't land when expected. General Nord is concerned. Only a few leaders know."

"Does anyone know where he was?"

Gina nodded. "Of course, I can't give an exact location. You will have to go for a debriefing so you can determine the extent of geological damage. Or, they may keep us here, so you can have radio contact. I have to wait until he calls back. Until then, we might as well go to the cafeteria."

Alex didn't even notice the food plopped on his plate. He shoved it into his mouth, waiting to see if Livia would return his text, or General Nord would call Gina.

His phone buzzed. As he flipped the cover off, Tom's name flashed on the screen. "Reached Hawaii. You wouldn't want to see it. Karen is safe. As is your dad. Take care."

"At least Karen's safe," Alex said.

"Did they make it?" Amber asked.

"Yes. Guess they still have to put out the bacteria," Alex said.

"When do you leave?" Alex replied.

The next message buzzed. "Hopefully in the morning."

"It's a start," Alex said. "I hoped to hear from Livia."

They finished eating in silence and walked out to sit beside the building. Not being able to leave until to General Nord contacted them would be a problem. Few words were spoken. Early morning flowed into midday.

Finally, Gina's phone rang. She took the call and walked around the building where they couldn't hear what she said. When she came back she waved to them. "Come on, we are going on to my family farm."

"Any news?" Alex asked.

"No. General Nord said it wouldn't do any good to wait any longer. He's checking with Dr. Rebecca and Champ. They may go to the location before they go to the New Madrid fault."

"What are the current stats?" Amber asked.

"I wish I knew," Gina said. "Although, I probably wouldn't understand them if he had told me what they were."

"May I call Dr. Rebecca?" Amber asked.

Gina smiled. "Go ahead. It won't take much time."

Amber pulled out her phone and walked around the building.

Now whether she was really calling Dr. Rebecca, or calling Karen, Alex couldn't be sure. Of course she might call them both.

With a lighter step, Amber walked back around the building.

"Dr. Rebecca thinks that is not going to be easy. We better accept living without fuel, and soon, no electricity," Amber said. "We better hurry if we want to reach your family's farm before there's any more problems."

Gina dashed to the helicopter. They settled in their seats, and she turned the helicopter on. Within moments, they were flying high above the base and on toward Oklahoma.

"What you said Amber, and what General Nord said, I think we'll be staying at my family's farm. I am sorry. I don't dare risk being in the air any further."

Alex was afraid to ask what Gina feared. Whether it was running out of fuel, a part breaking, or something scarier, he didn't want to know.

The sky turned ominous.

"Turbulence ahead." Gina shouted. "We have to hope they gave us enough fuel."

Dark clouds swirled in front of them.

"No way," Gina said. "I'm landing. Better to have to walk than to fall from the sky. No one could find us. There's no fuel for ambulances, if any hospitals are still open."

Gina sat the helicopter down in a mostly empty field and turned it off. "There's a barn over there. Think it's structurally sound?"

Alex glanced at Amber. "What do you think?"

"If that dark cloud forms a tornado, I don't want to be picked up and tossed like a piece of litter. Maybe we can find loose boards to hide under. Let's go." Amber grabbed her backpack and ran for the shelter, as tumbled down as it looked.

Alex and Gina followed. If they could reach the shelter before the storm racing in the same direction, they might be able to be safe. From his vantage, the barn seemed to tilt at an odd angle. The foundation might not be solid, as if anything was these days.

Amber reached the barn ahead of them. She jerked the door open. It fell off its hinges, and almost hit her on the head.

The ramshackle building could tumble with a good stiff wind. Grass blew almost flat at his feet, as the strong winded cloud raced toward them. "Let's grab the door. If we pull it under the brush over there, it should protect us some," Alex said.

In a few moments, they had pulled the door under the brush and created a protected pocket of air. The door was springy enough that if any pieces from the barn flew their way, they should be safe, unless the whole building sat down on top of them.

The wind howled.

Alex pushed Amber to the center, and took the outer edge, holding it close.

Chapter 7

Corbo's family

Livia leafed through the album her mother had given of the restaurant in better years. A few pictures from last year showed Josie and Nathan in their car by the front window. Neon signs gleamed behind them. Without electricity, there would be no more glimmer, or even photos to share with the future.

A life without the basics of the civilization she had come to expect had been what she, Josie, and Nathan, had fought against. They had helped so many illegal, and legal immigrants, to visit families, and catch a taste of the modern life, while a step away from the past. She'd had to learn a lot about their way of life to help them bridge the gap between cultures. It had made her want to stay in the modern world more than join their world. The outdoor couch, that had felt comfortable after the long ride in the tiny solar car, now hurt no matter which way Livia moved.

The heat was as rancid as the deer meat Desi had brought them and tried to dry in the sun. For years, she had spent many summer days outside, with what had then seemed like little food and water. The silence among the five adults, lack of food, and the well running dry meant they would all have to leave soon, if it wasn't too late.

"Does your phone work?" Corbo asked.

"Not enough battery left. I checked yesterday." Livia picked up her crutches and hobbled over to the table where the deer strips dried in the sun. Her phone was one more thing she missed. No contact with her dead friends, or her parents.

"I've always used the dehydrator. I wish I knew how to do them right in the sun. Such a waste of excellent meat. You're a good cook." Desi patted her on the shoulder and shook his head at the spoiling meat. "Guess we should have fed the travelers."

"We'll find more food soon. Corbo can help. The garden is mostly dried up. I know a few emergency food sources."

"No. I'm going to help my parents to the last group of evacuees in the morning. Then I'm off to find my brothers in Arizona. You and Corbo coming?"

"I thought all the evacuees were gone already." Livia pulled on one strip of deer meat that wasn't as rancid as the others. With a few dried up vegetables, she could make a thin stew.

"Not all of them are gone. Early this morning I walked into town. A poster said the last designated trip will leave at 8:00 AM." Desi pulled off a piece of rotting stinky meat and threw it to a cat. "Figure once I put them on the bus I can find my brothers."

"The little cart we have won't go far," Livia said. "I think it's only meant for one person."

Desi laughed. "Probably. I'll see what I can find in town."

Corbo walked into the clearing with two water buckets in hand. "At this rate, I'm going to need one of those old fashioned shoulder yokes to take some of the strain off my back and arms."

Desi clapped him on the back. "No antique one will fit you. Someone somewhere has to know how to make them strong. One of those weak bamboo painted ones wouldn't hold a drop of water for any distance."

Livia laughed as she cut up the vegetables and dropped them in the pot. So much old technology they now depended on. Most had been forgotten, long ago. Those who still knew how would survive. If the planet didn't settle down soon, modern technology might be gone as well. Secrets to the making of many modern tools where held by only one or two people. If those people died, there might not be access to their records, or written instructions to relearn how to create modern tools.

She hobbled around the table in the outdoor cooking area. It seemed her ankle had no intention of recovering. The pain wouldn't stop her, even if it did slow her down. Her parents would be missed, even though they rarely noticed her. In the days without electricity, she had talked more with her mom, than all the years of her life put together. They didn't need her. Corbo did need her.

Corbo depended on her to get better so they could continue to search for his father. His Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon had said almost nothing. It seemed they had no intention of giving him the information he needed to search. Aunt Anna's long face and lack of easy flowing English meant no matter where she went, people wouldn't quite trust her. Uncle Jon's leg wasn't healing. In normal times, Livia would have called and asked for transportation back to the Immi Clinic. Now, there was likely no one there either.

Desi had grown impatient with his parents. He glared at them when he even sat in the circle. With no way to hear from his brothers, there was no way of knowing exactly where they'd gone. They might have even been forcibly evacuated if the military caught them on the roads.

Silence hung over them heavier than the haze at mid-afternoon. The feeling of hope when they had arrived had given way to a deep drowning despair. Livia had grown tired of trying to break the silence. It was too much to ask them to speak. No one wanted to. Perhaps leaving would be the best thing. Though where they would go, she didn't know.

Morning dawned with light dew sprinkled across the ground. Livia sat up on the couch and looked around.

No sign of Corbo.

Her feet touched the ground, and she pulled herself up onto her crutches. The ankle ached in the early morning dampness and chill. If Amber were here, she'd know what to do. Even Josie knew more than she did about wrapping ankles. It was time she learned how to do it on her own, and not to depend on others.

She hobbled around the house to the solar vehicle.

Boxes and bags were stacked around the front of the vehicle.

"Hi." Corbo stepped out the door of the large broken down house. "There isn't much left in there. We found more food."

"Enough for breakfast?" Aunt Anna waited on the broken porch.

"Sure. Desi and I agree. Livia and Uncle Jon will ride in the cart. Aunt Anna will drive, and we will walk behind."

"I've never drove before. And I don't have a license," Aunt Anna said.

"You are the only one who can," Desi said. "They can't walk that far, and we weigh too much to drive and expect the solar power to get them into town."

Aunt Anna waved her hand at the mess of boxes. "You can't take all of our employer's belongings."

Desi laughed. "There's less here than you think. A little food. Some curtains and clothes. They'll be currency until they rot away." He dropped a bag beside his mother.

"We'll sort and carry what we can." He pawed through the bag and handed some beef jerky around. "Corbo, go bring your uncle

around and settle him in the back seat. We'll pack what we can on top of him."

Before long, the vehicle was packed. Corbo and Desi were weighed down with bags of old clothes.

Livia closed the door as Aunt Anna turned the key at Corbo's direction.

The vehicle jerked and jolted forward.

"Don't use the pedal too much. We need to keep up," Desi said.

At least it was only a mile into town. Livia gripped the rails until her knuckles turned white.

Aunt Anna steered down the middle of the three-lane road. Ignoring the speed limit signs, she barely reached twenty miles an hour.

"Turn left at the stop sign," Desi yelled. "We are meeting them at Indra's store."

The vehicle slowed to a crawl.

"Give some gas," Corbo said.

"Pedal's pushed all the way down," Aunt Anna said.

"Don't slow for the stop sign then," Corbo said.

They rounded the corner and coasted to a stop.

Desi caught up with them. "Almost there. I'll leave my pack here, and go meet them. They should come this far out of the way."

"Take your pack, or they won't believe you," Corbo said.

Desi dropped his pack. "On second thought, I'll stay and help empty everyone out. You go meet them Corbo, you've had more experience with the military people."

"I can go with you." Livia pulled herself to her feet on her crutches.

"Wait here," Corbo said. "They might need you. I'll be back."

Her heart beat wildly as he walked down the dust covered road away from her. She grasped the doorframe. Staying with his aunt, uncle, and feuding Desi would be a tension filled time until his return.

Desi lifted Uncle Jon out of the vehicle and sat him in the shade of a nearby building.

Livia grabbed the bags she could carry and hobbled over beside them. A few bottles of water had been hid inside one. She handed them out as they waited. "You aren't hiding too, are you?"

With a shake of his head, Desi drank a few sips of water. "Trying to help Corbo. And I want to say goodbye."

"Should I go away?"

"No need. Mom, I don't know the truth. I guess none of us do. And I really don't care anymore. I hope you find my sisters and they can take care of you."

A screech of tires rounded the building. An old broken school bus slid into view. Windows down. Sullen faces peeked out at them. Breaks squealed as the vehicle stopped beside them.

Corbo walked around the front and with Desi's help, helped Uncle Jon up the steps and to a seat near the front. Aunt Anna, with tears rolling down her cheeks, followed. Desi ran back and carried the few remaining bags, to toss on top of the vehicle and strap them down.

"You going too?" The driver asked.

"Desi said he was going to find us a vehicle to make it back to General Nord," Livia said.

The man nodded. "A scout will be through in about a half hour."

"Please forgive me," Aunt Anna wailed.

"We do," Corbo said. "No go, and be safe."

Corbo and Desi walked back to Livia, and placed their arms around her shoulders, supporting her.

When the bus pulled away, she slumped to the ground. This was worse than watching her parents leave. This time she had seen the faces of others, some she, Josie, and Nathan had helped in years past. The beaten last remnants of unwanted immigrants who hoped for a future somewhere.

Chapter 8

Indra's shop near Corbo's family Los Alamos, New Mexico

The bus pulled away slowly, and with a bang. Maybe it was engine trouble. Corbo sat down. The people he had known as his parents were gone from his life, likely forever. If the bus made it to the evacuation camps, they would never return.

"I'm going for a walk before the scout arrives," Desi said.

"Do you want us to wait on you?" Corbo shifted his pack to provide shade as the sun continued its ascent.

"I may find them first. I won't be long." Desi stalked off down the dusty street.

"Do you think they will send us back to General Nord?" Livia asked.

He reached over and grasped her hand. Though she hadn't shown much pain, the ankle wasn't healing like it should. With no painkillers to keep inflammation down, and lack of food, it was no wonder. Perhaps, a few days at the base would be best for her recovery. It would mean more time from away finding his dad. If his dad hadn't evacuated. "Do you want to go back to the base?"

She shook her head. "We'd never have permission to leave. I'd rather go before the scouts arrive if we can."

Glass shattered somewhere a few streets over. A mangy pair of dogs raced down the road in front of them. Clouds of dust hung in their wake in the early morning sunshine.

Corbo reached into his pack and pulled out his gun. He only had a few bullets, so he had to aim carefully if a raider attacked them.

Livia backed up to lean against the cool adobe brick building. She couldn't run anywhere.

Silence and sunshine were all he could see.

Desi, with a jaunty smile on his face, sauntered around the corner of the building carrying a box and a bag. When he reached them, he sat the box and bag down. "I broke into the gun store. The owners didn't leave much. Will these fit your gun?" He held out a box of cartridges.

Corbo took them. "Yes they will. Breaking and entering, even now is still illegal. I don't think I can keep them." He turned the box around. Illegal, definitely. A boon for their safety, if no one knew, until the bullets ran out.

"Ask the scouts when they arrive. I'll see you later."

"What. Aren't you going with us?" Corbo said.

Desi picked up his pack and the bag from the gun store. "I'm going south to Mexico to search for mom's family. Stay safe. I'll find you."

"I thought you were going to find Inno and Miggy."

"I am. They went south to find the address the letters to mom's family always go. You go north, and we'll meet in Arizona. I'll find you somehow. It'll be a long trip."

Something rumbled a few streets over.

"I have a horse waiting. Go." Desi ran off between the buildings.

Coro helped Livia up. It would be a long ride for Desi, and finding him again didn't seem likely. He pushed the box deep into his bag and held the gun steady.

Two military scout vehicles rounded a corner and screeched to a stop before them.

A woman stepped out and showed her identification. "You must be Corbo and Livia."

"Yes we are," Corbo said.

"Did you find your family?"

"We found my aunt and uncle. They left on the last transport. We need to go to Arizona to look for my dad."

"Solar vehicle not doing well?"

He shook his head.

"Ride with us. We'll take you see General Nord. Good food and new bandages for Livia will go a long way."

Livia pulled back. "Climbing isn't easy right now."

"I'll lift you," Corbo said.

The ride to the base was as long as the one after Livia's protester friends had attacked Dr. Rebecca's van many months ago. The dry cracked road spread out in front of them. The driver and other soldiers didn't say a word. Not that there was much to be said.

Upon arrival at the base the driver turned in and pulled up in front of a building they recognized.

Corbo helped Livia out, and steadied her on the ground.

"I can manage." Livia hobbled to the door.

Corbo grabbed their backpacks and followed. As stubborn as ever. Even a twisted ankle hadn't changed her. He'd better get used to it if he needed her help. Whenever he met authorities, they always startled him into silence. He'd have to depend on her for speech, as much as she had to depend on him for carrying their backpacks.

Chilled air flowed out of the door he held open. It would almost be a relief to be inside. Somehow the base had electricity. Livia's crutches clicked down the hallway.

The driver pointed to a room to the right.

Corbo followed Livia inside. A makeshift cafeteria had been set up in what had been a uniform storage room. General Nord sat at the table nearest the door.

He looked up from his paperwork and dropped his pen. "Livia, Corbo, come join me." He turned to the soldier beside him. "Bring food trays for them."

Corbo pulled out a chair and pushed their backpacks under the table. "Sir, Livia's leg isn't healing. We need to go on."

General Nord leaned back in his chair. "You helped your aunt and uncle?"

"They left on the last transport."

The soldier returned with two trays of food.

"Eat. I'll be back in a few minutes." General Nord stood up and walked to the door. Before going through, he returned for his pen.

Corbo glanced at Livia and dug into the meat and vegetables. At least there was no fear of them being rancid.

The first soldier left and returned a few minutes later with another soldier.

"Hi, I'm the only nurse on base. Let me look at your ankle," she said.

Livia turned in her chair, and the woman took her leg gently in her lap. An almost groan escaped as the woman touched the anklebone under the wrap.

"There's a lot of swelling," the woman said.

Livia's face was red. She nodded.

"Let me show you how to wrap the bandage better."

The woman started working with Livia.

Corbo pushed his tray aside and stood up. He could learn how to help her adjust the bandages. Should have thought of it sooner.

The door opened slowly. "Corbo will you come with me for a moment?" General Nord said.

"I'll leave our backpacks." Corbo followed behind General Nord.

They went into small office. "Sorry for the lack of space. I'm giving you some papers that may help you find your father. I will need you to contact me if you see any fault or volcano activity." General Nord held the pages out of reach.

"I don't know as much as Amber and Alex. And how can I let you know if no cell phone towers have power?"

"The truck I'm giving you has a radio. It'll reach me, or other relay stations. Will you do it?"

Corbo nodded. He really had no choice.

General Nord pointed to the map. "Follow these roads as best you can. Stay safe, we need you both, as well as Amber and Alex."

"Sir, you trust us?"

He nodded. "You'd go without my help. So, I'm providing my personal vehicle, fuel, and food. Not sure how far you'll get."

Corbo took the pages from his out stretched hands.

"One more thing." The general's face was more lined with care than he had ever seen.

"Yes sir?"

"Stop at this point and inform my wife I won't be home for dinner." The general pointed to a spot on the map.

Corbo looked down at the pages in his hand. On top was an enclosed envelope labeled "Varanda Nord." He nodded and ran back to Livia.

Chapter 9

Longdale, Oklahoma

Amber slid under the door next to Alex. There wasn't much room, and the barn didn't look safe enough to have stayed in. Gina crawled underneath beside her. They'd all be wet for sure.

Rain pelted down and bounced back up striking them all over. Strong winds tried to rip the board out of their hands. The boulder they had wedged it under behind them rolled off and it flipped up at that end too.

They could no longer see the barn a few hundred feet away. The helicopter was long out of sight. Eerily, the lighting changed from black to green. The rain slowed and a cloud whisked down to the ground almost out of sight, and raced toward them. The funnel stretched across the landscape, hopping about, and dropping bits of lumber and debris. Before reaching the helicopter, it jumped upward, with enough downdraft to flip the copter onto its side.

Gina gasped. "My livelihood!"

Our lives. Amber grasped the edge of the door closer. Almost no food, no water, and no idea where they were, could they survive to meet the goals General Nord had asked them to complete? They'd have to figure out a way, somehow.

The funnel advanced on their hiding place. Amber wiggled closer to Alex to help him hold the door as the winds threatened to rip it away. The tornado grabbed bits of the barn as it approached. Walls disappeared into the cloud as it scattered debris behind it. It moved on to the west, and slipped back up into the sky.

Blue sky crowded out the darkened clouds that had taken their only transportation from them in this barren wasteland that had once been a farmer's livestock fields.

Alex lifted the door off of them.

Soaking wet, and muddy, they were safe for the moment. Small animals came out of hiding and scampered away to the scattered remains of the barn.

"If my phone works, I'm calling General Nord." Gina wiped a tear from her eye. "We'll make it somehow."

"I thought I saw a kitten, I'm going to check on it," Alex said.

Amber followed. She didn't want to hear General Nord's side of the conversation. He'd either be loud and angry, or silent and sullen. She pulled out her phone and looked at it. With no idea when or where they'd have a chance to charge them up again, they'd better take turns using their phones.

Alex petted the scared tabby kitten he had found. Other than a little missing fur, and a bottlebrush tail, it looked fine.

"Amber, Alex, guess what?" Gina shouted as she ran toward them waving her phone.

"What?" Amber adjusted her backpack.

"General Nord said we aren't far from where Windy is. She has horses; and will bring them to us. We have to hike to the town of Longdale, about three miles back northwest of here. At least the helicopter didn't break up. We can recover some of the gear, and navigation tools."

Gina raced off to the helicopter.

Amber didn't mind letting her run ahead. Windy had horses, and was on her way here. Amazing. If only she could have saved Fortune. The memory of the dammed rolling Rio Grande, with animals trying to escape both it and the Jornada del Muerto volcano, dimmed her eyes to the here and now.

Alex touched her shoulder. "I'm going to try to save the kitten. I'll ask Gina if she has an empty bag we can carry it in. It's scared."

Amber picked the young tabby cat up. Not Taffy, that's for sure. In fact, no one knew if Taffy, or her kittens, survived. The kitten purred and licked the tip of her nose. It reached up with both paws to hug her face. There was a wet spot on Amber's cheek that she couldn't decide if it was from the kitten's licks, or a tear. No time for tears.

She cuddled the cat close and followed Alex to the helicopter. A three-mile walk across a land none of them knew with a scared kitten. And then, they'd have to find a place to leave the kitten. It couldn't travel on horseback.

Gina stepped out of the helicopter remains bubbling. "Whatever you name the kitty, I'll keep her. We will need as many barn cats as we can find in the coming days. Here is my future sister-in-law's gift bag. It should hold the kitten."

Gina held out a canvas bag with a mesh top.

Amber opened it and sat the purring kitten inside. It curled up into a ball as she rubbed its head.

Alex lifted the bag. "I'll carry the kitten."

Gina pulled out a backpack and loaded it with assorted pieces she had tossed on the ground. "We can't expect to come back for it. Alex, can you look ahead for a small stream of safe drinking water?"

Amber and Alex trudged ahead of Gina. The kitten slept quietly in the bag. Short grass made walking easier, and dead animals more visible. One was a skeletal cow that may have been dead before the storm. "I imagine she has to bring something we aren't supposed to see," Alex said.

"Like the black box?" Amber asked.

"Like something pertinent to her real mission after her wedding. We don't know what that really is."

"She won't be able to complete it now. I hope we can complete ours."

"We will. I think we will hear from your mom and Brandon. With Karen and Tom going to Yellowstone with dad, I hope we can maintain contact," Alex said.

"I'd be happy to be able to talk to mom and Karen again. I even miss Brandon." No sign of water anywhere.

Buildings rose in the distance.

The kitten meowed.

Alex stopped and opened the bag to check on it. "I think it's hungry."

Amber reached in and petted the cat. "I don't even know how to tell if it's a boy cat, or a girl cat. Karen would know."

Alex sat the red box on the ground. "I only know it's a female if it has babies, though I've seen videos of kittens snuggling up to males too."

The helicopter was out of sight. They sat and rested under an almost leafless tree and waited on Gina. The kitten played in Amber's lap, chasing a bug up and down her legs.

Gina appeared over the ridge carrying a heavy backpack. "It's not much further. Are you both tired?"

"Checking on the kitten," Amber said. "We can go on now."

Gina petted the purring feline. "I think it's a girl. I'll check later, when we make it home."

Home. The memory of home brought tears to Amber's eyes. It probably didn't exist anymore. Everything there was gone, abandoned, even by Karen.

She struggled along behind Gina and Alex. No one spoke, and even the kitten was silent.

"We're supposed to look for the Post Office," Gina said.

They crossed two streets, and saw the sign in the distance. Under the sign was the now familiar trailer, with a few extra dings in the paint and metal.

Amber ran for the trailer. She dropped her backpack and peeked in through the open rails.

Squealing with delight, she ran to open the back door.

Fortune trotted out and leaned her head against Amber's shoulder.

Burying her head in Fortune's mane, Amber let out all the tears she dared for her missing mom. One good friend who asked for nothing more than food, water, and companionship. She wiped her eyes and glanced up into Windy's shinning eyes.

"I know she'll have good home with you," Windy said.

Chapter 10

Longdale Oklahoma to Oklahoma Landfill

Alex's eyes misted when Amber opened the back door of the trailer and Fortune trotted out. The horse meant so much to Amber. Horses would be their only source of transportation now, and in the near future, at least until the refineries could restart.

Even if Mother Nature stopped shaking in her sleep, it would take months, or even years, before production of fuel would make vehicle travel realistic again. If it happened even then. Many secrets of production were held by only one person at the head of corporations. If that person died, or any number of links along the chain had died, production of that item might never occur again. For vehicular travel, there was raw fuel recovery, useful product production, fuel transportation, vehicle design, and raw materials that couldn't reach the manufactures in companies to build parts all over the world.

"Your horse is here too," Windy said. "I'm to pick up fuel here and go on to New Madrid to meet Dr. Rebecca. Where are you going?"

Alex reached for the mane of the horse he had ridden before. He recognized him at least. Well fed, and ready to go, full of energy and spirit. The first time he had seen the horse, it was barely alive, a dirty skeleton, with no spirit. He looked so different than Amber's horse. Though of course, Fortune would show her temper when she wanted to.

"We are going to stop at the Oklahoma City landfill and drop off some bacteria." Alex held up the red box for Windy to see.

She nodded. "Be careful out there. There'll be people and wild animals looking for food, fuel, and whatever they can find."

"They wouldn't search in a dump, would they?" Amber rubbed Fortune's neck.

"Sure would. It'll be easy, as no one can stop them. No stores are open anywhere. Where else will they go?"

"I wouldn't want to eat out of a dump," Amber said.

"Most won't, they'll find fuel to burn to keep warm." Windy petted the kitten as it romped up onto the trailer.

Before long, they left for the close to one hundred mile journey to Gina's home. Amber remained distant, lost deep in thought, and only spoke when spoken too. Her pain must have been deep, and Alex couldn't reach it. Pushing her wouldn't help. Being nearby, steady, and ready when she needed him was all he could do.

After two days of travel, they reached the Oklahoma City landfill. As Windy predicted, it was crawling with dogs, birds, rats, and people. Children ran, slipped, and slid through the mounds of garbage. Adults waited on the sides, guarding piles that had been brought to them.

"Where can we go to?" Gina asked.

"Let's ride around to the other side," Alex said. "There has to be an open place somewhere."

Birds that looked like they belonged on the sea, and not this far inland, fluttered in and out among the people and dogs screeching at the tops of their lungs.

They rode around the sea of garbage and fluttering wings and cloth. Children in little better than rags, ran by the horses, and tried to grab their manes and tails.

Amber strode ahead, her head held high. "I think I see an opening."

"Let's go back, it's almost dark," Alex said.

"We need to finish today, so we can go on," Amber said.

"He's right," Gina said.

Amber reluctantly turned Fortune away. "I want to be done here. It looks so forlorn and lost."

"I have a plan," Alex said.

They rode beyond the sound of the active garbage mine.

"What's your plan?" Amber said.

"If we try to release it now, someone will take the plastic we release it on, and it won't help. We have to wait until after nightfall and go back," Alex said.

"Or," Gina said. "Rest and eat. There's another landfill south of here. We can be there about midnight."

"Good idea," Alex said.

Perhaps instead of a major landfill, they should find an illegal dump where no one was looking for food or fuel.

Midnight, and the moon was barely a sliver of light. He led the horses down the pathway, avoiding the road as much as possible.

They would have to sneak in, do their job, and sneak out. He'd leave Amber and Gina in a safe place to wait, if he could find one.

The miles through town had led through many people with shifty eyes and bodies, watching the horses they rode, as if the horses would be their next meal if the riders left them alone a minute. They had even eaten huddled on the horses as raggedy children ran in circles at the stamping horse's feet.

Even now, in the dark, eyes gleamed as they rode by. It was if all the local people no longer lived in their homes. Perhaps the people were afraid of a structure failure, or the homes were stifling without their accustomed air conditioning. A once snug home, would become a death trap if, like many modern buildings, the windows couldn't be opened.

A truck blocked the path to the landfill entrance. A man in uniform sat with a rifle guarding the treasures buried deep within.

Alex took a deep breath. Somehow, they had to get beyond the gate and do their job.

Gina rode up beside him. "Let me try."

The man pointed his gun at Gina as she rode closer.

Her military uniform glinted in the moonlight. She pulled out her identification and showed it to the man. After a whispered conversation, she waved back to Amber and Alex.

When they reached her, Gina said, "Tie the horses to the bumper. He has a friend patrolling inside. We'll have to be quick, and follow his lead."

The other guard arrived at the gate and waved them through, locking it fast behind them. "What are you here for?"

Alex quickly explained.

The man closed his eyes a moment and nodded. "How long do you think it takes to work and multiply?"

"No idea," Alex said. "I'd say months most likely."

"Follow me." Their guide led them around the perimeter for at least a half mile. He stopped and pointed at a towering mountain of garbage. "There. There's a ladder where a garbage archeology project was going on. Descend it quickly, drop your samples, and come back up. There are shovels. We'll cover it a few feet deep in a hurry if we can."

Alex sat the kitten's bag down. "Can you watch our tiger?"

The man grinned. "As long as I don't have to open the cage."

Alex took Amber's hand. "We have to hurry. I'll go down."

At the top of the narrow hole was a rickety ladder with a bucket on a rope.

"No way Alex, it'll bury you if your long legs bump the sides. Let me go down."

"You can't dig your way back out."

"I've had more experience than you at climbing down research ravines. I'll take the bucket with the samples. You can pull me back out," Amber said.

Reluctantly, he agreed. He held the ladder steady as she climbed down. At last, the rope stopped moving. Gina's flashlight bounced around off the towering walls. If he yelled to check on her, the walls might collapse, or worse, bring spectators.

Finally, she began the climb back to the top.

He took her hand and helped her over the last rung of the ladder.

"The air's bad down there, and water." She gasped for air.

"Did you succeed?"

Amber nodded. "Three feet up. Hurry."

He pulled the ladder out of the hole and tossed it to the side.

Gina grabbed two shovels nearby.

They quickly pushed and dug through the loose garbage, filling the hole as fast, and as deep, as they could.

A low murmur in the distance grew.

"Hurry," the guard shouted.

Alex dropped the shovel. Grabbing Amber's hand, they ran to the guard to pick up their bags, including the meowing cat.

They followed the guard back to the gate.

People with firebrands stood outside, far too close to the horses.

Fortune whinnied and pulled at her rope.

Amber ran through the gate toward her.

One man waved his fire stick between her and Fortune.

Fortune pulled loose and kicked him in the head.

The man fell on the ground. Blood pulled around a gaping hole in his head.

"Why did they let you in?"

Flames flickered in the air.

They couldn't tell the truth, and these people would recognize a lie.

"Official business. Had to be sure it is safe. Hazardous materials are buried here, and they can kill you, and all of us if we stay any longer. Toxic fumes are blowing this way right now," Gina said.

Alex hurried to his horse to calm him. Not exactly the truth. Believable enough to the people around them.

The volume lowered as people stared at them. "Is it safe to be here?"

Gina's uniform glistened in the moonlight. "No. It won't be for many generations. Ground water will be affected for miles. Go now, and find a safe place for you, and your families."

"What about our water?"

"It should be safe until mid-morning," Gina said. "I wouldn't trust it beyond that. Go now, so you can leave early."

The crowd grumbled as they turned slowly and walked away in bunches.

The guard who had been with them gave a startled cry when he reached the truck door.

Gina hurried over to the guard. Her face was pale as she ran back to them. "They killed the guard for doing his job. We are going now." She climbed on her horse and galloped toward the south.

Alex groaned as he and Amber raced after her. No place was safe when people were so scared they would kill a person for keeping them from garbage. Hopefully, Gina's home would be safe from looting.

Chapter 11

Los Alamos, New Mexico to Varanda Nord's

Livia groaned as the nurse wrapped her foot. It felt too tight. Her skin pulsed and throbbed against the elastic bandage.

"Here. You take it off, and try to put it back on," the nurse said.

Livia lifted her foot onto a nearby chair and nodded. Figuring this out would help her and Corbo both. It took a few tries to wrap it right, and the throbbing no longer occurred.

Corbo walked back in the room holding papers. "We leave after we finish eating. General Nord gave us an assignment to do before we can find my father. I have to see what these papers say." He sat down at his half-empty tray and shoveled food into his mouth.

"Thank you," Livia said to the nurse.

"Here are a few extra bandages. Wish we could put the ankle in a better cast for you. I don't have the supplies." The nurse smiled at her before she left the room.

"I'll manage." Livia took the bandages and pushed them in her backpack. "What's the extra assignment?"

Corbo looked into her eyes. "A letter to his wife."

If she were even there. "She should have evacuated."

"You didn't, and we aren't even married," Corbo said.

It took a lot of strength to be married to man who wasn't there all the time. General Nord's wife would likely remind her of Amber, full of strength, sure of herself, while kind to others. Not that she had returned the favor, not really. "How far?"

"We should be there by evening, if no problems. Ready?"

Her tray sat unfinished. Somehow, she wasn't hungry. She wouldn't waste the food. Not now. Not like when she was younger, her parents ran the deli, and she could gab anything she wanted, anytime. Livia wrapped the food and shoved it in her backpack. "Let's go."

Corbo stood up and handed her crutches to her.

Someday she would be off them, and able to go where she wished. She followed him down the hall, the constant clicking an annoyance, and a distraction. Soldiers stared as they passed.

It was almost dark when Corbo drove the rattling truck up to the wooden fence. "This should be the place. I'll open the gate."

Livia covered her eyes. It should have been her job to get out and open the gate. Since she'd have to take the time with the crutches, they'd use far more fuel. And, she wasn't sure she could climb back in on her own.

The door squeaked open and Corbo slid in beside her. A few feet inside the gate, he left to close the gate behind them.

Livia turned her attention to the gravel road in front of her. It stretched as far as she could see. Fences ran down both sides. Cows congregated near some brushy trees in the distance.

"You okay?" Corbo asked on his return.

"I don't want to be a burden to you like I was to my parents."

Corbo touched her hand as the truck started forward. "I don't think your parents thought of you as a burden. Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon I'm sure thought I was burden. A reminder."

Livia glanced at him. Lost in her own misery at not being able to help him, she had poured salt in his raw wounds, and rubbed it in. She closed her eyes a second. Sometimes though, salt helped the wounds heal once the pain was past. Or, so Windy had said. She touched his hand. "We'll find him."

"We have to find Varanda first. Where is the house this road should lead to?" He steered around a curve in the fence.

"There's more brush up there, and I think the house is hidden in it."

The gravel slid between the tallest brush she had seen in miles. Once between the vehicle high trees, an empty dry dirt yard appeared. It was surrounded by an even taller fence. The house behind it was only one story, and a ramp led to the door.

"Looks like she's eager to keep people out," Corbo said. "I'll park. See if you can open it."

Livia slipped out of the truck and walked over to the gate. An old fashioned bell and pulley system was attached. She rang the bell, and the string pulled taunt. An answering bell sounded in the distance. All she could do was wait with her crutches leaned up against the gate.

About to give up and hobble back to the truck, the front door creaked open.

A straggled woman glanced behind her, held up her hand, and quickly closed the door. She strode purposefully across the barren yard. Her hand slipped a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she did so. The woman approached the gate, glanced at the truck, and leaned her head to one side. "What do you want? I'm not buying anything."

"Are you General Nord's wife Varanda?"

The woman laughed. "No. She is inside right now."

"Corbo has a letter for her. Can you please ask her to come out?" This woman looked as out of place as the immigrants she used to help. Maybe being nice to her wouldn't work.

The woman put her hands on hips. "Not sure she will come out. If she doesn’t, you'll have to leave."

The woman walked back to the door, frequently looking over her shoulder. As she opened it, four shepherd dogs bounded out barking ferociously. They ran for the gate with tails high.

Livia stepped back, and held her hand out, palm down. This signal usually meant stop or down, though some people used it to mean something else.

The dogs barked at her, and didn't try to tear off the gate.

She held her hand closer to the gate, and used her other hand to waft her smell closer to them.

The dogs relaxed, sat down, and watched her. Their tails wagged consistently. A brown shepherd stayed closer to the house, with one ear up and listening.

Dogs hadn't been pets in her home. Even so, she had learned to read their body language some. They weren't as easy to read as scared immigrants, and their moods could change in a second.

The door creaked open again. The brown shepherd barked and ran toward the tiny Mexican woman riding a wheelchair down the ramp. A Mexican married to a general would make life even more difficult. Now, to decide if General Nord didn't want anyone to know about his wife, or if she chose to hide from the world of her own accord, much like Corbo.

The woman reached the fence. "I'm Varanda. Where is Corbo?"

Corbo stepped up behind her. "I have a letter for you. Sorry to be so rude. I have to verify you are who you say you are."

She nodded. "General Nord said you are going to Arizona to search for your father. Now tell me something to verify your identity."

"I didn't know until recently. And Livia broke her ankle."

The woman nodded to the crutches. "So she did. You better come in and stay here tonight." Varanda pulled a set of keys out of lap and unlocked the gate. The dogs bounced around her.

Livia hobbled inside. "Do you have many wild animals or people you have to keep out?"

Varanda took the letter Corbo handed her and set it in her lap. After locking the gate, the keys landed with a thump on the letter. When the woman turned the chair to lead them back to the house she said, "The gate doesn't keep anything out. It keeps my son in."

The tall fence was to keep people in, and not out. What a strange way of doing things. Of course, Varanda couldn't chase a child across open cow pastures.

The brown shepherd nudged the woman's hand.

A young boy, about five, ran out the door waving a branch.

"Olen, you were napping."

He ran around the fence, ignoring them all.

The other woman came out the door. "Sorry. Are they staying?"

Varanda nodded. "Stay with Olen. I'll tell the cook." She rolled in the door with practiced ease.

Livia glanced back the boy, who apparently was pretending his stick was an airplane along the fence line. She pulled the door closed gently and followed Varanda's voice down a long hallway.

Chapter 12

Varanda Nord's New Mexico

He couldn't drive all night, so a rest behind a fence might be the safest choice. The shadows were already long as Corbo followed Livia and Varanda to the house.

When the boy ran out, Corbo stepped back. The child ignored the adults as if they were merely blades of dried summer grass by the watering hole. Could the child know how he felt? Weaving through the lives of others, ignored, and trying to not be seen so he could enjoy the smallest pleasures life had to offer.

Olen flew his stick plane along the fence.

Corbo smiled. His mother would have a tough time raising him, even if she were whole and healthy. In a wheelchair, it would be a whole nother challenge.

They gathered around the kitchen table. A cook prepared the meal, and added more food to pans already on the stove.

Varanda rolled up to the empty place and pulled out the letter.

Corbo turned away and looked around the room. It wasn't much. A long low kitchen, with everything in easy reach. Even Olen could have reached most of it.

"Thank you Corbo. This letter has brought me closure, even if I never see my husband again."

Corbo wiggled in his chair.

"Can you survive here?" Livia asked.

"Oh yes. I'll miss my husband of course. I have a cook, a nanny, and many farm hands and their families here. You'd be welcome to join us if you wanted to stay."

"Only tonight," Livia said. "We have to find Corbo's father."

Varanda placed the letter in a pouch on the side of her chair. "The general spoke highly of you both."

That was a surprise. He always made it seem like helping others was the last thing on his mind. Then again, he had given them his truck. It wouldn't be likely Corbo could return it.

Olen ran into the kitchen and launched into his mother's lap. He sat there and stared at Corbo.

Corbo reached out. "How are you?"

With a grunt, Olen leaned back.

The other woman came in and set the table.

The brown shepherd walked over and nuzzled Olen. Then, he nuzzled against Corbo's hand with a cold, tickly motion before touching Olen's hand.

Olen looked up at Corbo and made a strange sound that Corbo couldn't recognize.

"Don't worry. Olen won't hurt you. He doesn't like change."

"That's why you stayed?" Livia asked.

Varanda nodded. "His older brothers and sisters are working in the refugee camps. I think his favorite sister may come home though. She doesn't like to leave me here."

"He's not happy we came, and won't be happy when we leave, will he?" Corbo said.

Livia waved to Olen, and searched through her backpack. She brought out a stuffed toy bird and handed it him.

"He'll adjust if you only stay one night."

Olen nibbled the feet of the toy bird.

"Food's ready." The cook carried three heavy bowls to the table.

A man came in and took the heavy pans into another room, full of people talking and laughing.

Place settings were simple. Light beige plates on a darker wood table, a napkin, and a spoon. No forks or knives were available. Corbo glanced up at Varanda.

She shook her head and patted Olen's head.

Olen nibbled on the bird's feet until his mother filled his plate.

Corbo took a scoop of potatoes, meatloaf, and beans. He'd eaten with less. Instead of digging in though, he watched the technique Olen used to eat. While he didn't relish eating the meatloaf with his hands, or using the mashed potatoes to paint the table, he decided the meatloaf would make a good solid item to slide the rest of the food against.

After the meal, the nanny took Olen out of the room. He carried the bird by its feet, while the beak bounced on the floor. The brown shepherd followed him.

The cook cleared the table and washed the dishes, including the pans and plates from the other room.

Corbo wanted to say something, though he wasn't sure what. He pulled his backpack closer to him and reached in.

"Wait a bit," Varanda said.

They sat in an uneasy silence until the cook finished the dishes.

Varanda hummed a tune.

Livia rested her head on the table.

"If that'll be all?"

Varanda nodded. "Please close the door behind you."

The cook raised an eyebrow at her boss.

Varanda ignored her.

As soon as the door closed, Varanda turned to Corbo. "I can tell you what you need to know. General Nord believes that your dad has a sibling married to someone on the reservation in southern Arizona. It's a long trek. I came through there myself, many years ago."

"How much do you know?" Livia reached toward her.

Varanda touched her hand and drew back. "Not much. The General found your dad's name, and traced him to his last known place of employment, when he left to find your mother. He hasn't been seen since. If anyone knows anything, it would be the tribe on the reservation."

"They would have evacuated," Corbo said.

"A few may have. Most wouldn't. That's the only home they know. They provide border protection, as well as have an uneasy truce with the military there. Many there help out at the immigrant prisons."

"Dad wouldn't be in prison would he?"

"Technically, no. If procedures were followed correctly. However, if he had your mom, aunt, and uncle's passports, as well as his own, it's difficult to say."

The door opened and a man walked in.

"You will be shown to the guesthouse now. Breakfast will be brought to you in the morning. I won't be out to say goodbye. I hope you can leave before Olen wakes up, so he thinks tonight is a dream. I wish you a safe journey, and hope you find your father. You are welcome back if you want to return."

"Thank you for everything." Corbo picked up his backpack to follow the man out.

He helped Livia up and onto her crutches.

Varanda was a mystery. One moment so nice and friendly, and next as brisk as an August wind. It would be too dark to read the pages General Nord had given them. He'd find time in the morning before they left.

Chapter 13

Elmore City, Oklahoma

Amber and Alex rested in the shade of the brush beside the pond. Humidity hung in the air as almost visible droplets. Four ponds surrounded the ranch, with a large lake to the south.

Goldie panted beside them. Chasing rabbits would have to wait until dusk, after she herded the cattle from one fenced in yard to another.

A wonderful place to be, if only, they had completed their mission for General Nord. Gina's wedding a month ago had been perfect. Until the ground shook, and communication with distant relatives had been lost on the laptops recording the ceremony.

Five days passed before anyone had reached them with news. Gina and her new husband had left a few weeks ago to complete their new sealed mission. The general had also sent an updated mission for Amber and Alex. Now they'd have to finish the rest of the previous mission General Nord had given them, as well as a few new orders.

"Amber!" A small boy yelled from the farmhouse. "Come help."

"Be right there, Danny." It could only mean one thing. Dena was scared again. If only she could find a way to live in peace with herself and her family.

"I'll get the horses ready," Alex said. "Come on, Goldie."

Goldie turned her head at her name.

"Go find Fortune and Crispy." Alex pointed.

"Our packs are ready. See you in a few." Amber kissed his face and ran to the farmhouse.

"I can't!" The frail woman in front of Amber sobbed. "If I am caught doing anything, I'll lose my disability check."

Amber patted her shoulder. "Dena, please. You are the only one who can help. Everyone else is busy."

"The inspectors. I've been warned." Her fists clenched. "I was babysitting one day. An inspector caught me. He told me if I could babysit for two hours, I could hold down an eight-hour job, six days a week."

The woman sobbed so loud everyone on the ranch could hear her. Amber glanced around, and sure enough, her family had stopped their chores to watch. Heat rose as the summer sun reached toward mid-morning. Dena would have to calm down if she didn't want to have a heat stroke.

Danny, a dirt smeared little boy in overalls, tugged on Dena's sleeve. "Momma, it's okay. We won't tell."

Dena hugged the child close and managed to mumble. "I know dear. I am sorry you have to work, and I can't even help."

Her husband, George stepped up to her. He leaned his hay rake against a wall. "No one is coming. Do what you can. Don't overdo. Please. We need you as much as you need us."

Dena sobbed louder as she collapsed on the ground. "I hate this invisible illness. Some days I can do anything I want. Others." Her hands covered her face as she leaned over on the ground.

Alex reached over and took the woman's hand. "Dena. We need you. Please, help your mother cook meals for your family and friends. Your reputation as a cook has preceded you. Teach Naomi too. No one will know. We will pretend you are supervising from your sick bed if it will help."

She wiped her eyes. "I can do that. I can have my husband bring my easy chair into the kitchen, and collapse in it if I see any investigators peeking through the windows."

Dena strode back to the large ranch house with a spring in her step.

Her husband followed her. "At least she will try," he whispered.

Danny walked up to Amber. "What will we do if they take momma's money away?"

Amber knelt down and held the child close. "Danny, no one will purposely take it away. There isn't any left. Every one of us must find our place in the new world. The quakes changed everything."

She grabbed Danny's shoulders, and leaned him back to peer into his dirty face. Tears smudged his dirty face. "Soon, it won't matter. There aren't any investigators to come. Convince your mom. Learn to live life as it was meant to be lived. In small steps, a bit each day, not overwhelming like the last few decades. We all have a part to share. What will you share with your family and friends?"

Danny wiped his eyes and pulled away. He glanced at his family and their friends. "I wanna be a teacher. I wanna teach others that just cause mom can't work all day doesn't mean she can't care for us. Or do a few little things every day. I wanna teach her to not be afraid anymore." More tears rolled down his cheeks as Gina and Dena's relatives clapped their hands.

Amber hugged him. "You will. I hope someday you lead your small band of families to be the greatest teachers. To remember where you came from, and where you are going. Keep your hope alive. Here, take this."

Amber reached deep into her pocket and pulled out a data disk. A thumb drive full of information, old maps, and books that might matter someday to the descendants of this child. At least, she hoped it would. The disk was one of the gifts General Nord had given her to share with the communities they visited, in hopes that knowledge would someday once again be readily available to all.

"Please take care of this. Give it your child as a reminder of your past, and your hope for the future."

Two pre-teen girls, Sophie and Vivie, laughed in the background.

She turned to them. "Why do you laugh?"

"Everyone has a thumb drive. There're outdated now, anyway, we use cloud storage." Sophie was the cleanest person there, not a speck of dust on her shirt or shorts. She fanned herself with a paper fan, and glared at the sky.

"Soon the power will be back on. We will all be inside, out of this awful heat." The girl lowered her gaze to Amber, with a smirk on her face.

Power wouldn't be back on, and this girl would have to change her outlook on life.

"Don't count on it. Your ancestors lived without refrigeration. You can too. They didn't use paper fans in the early morning, before the sun rose. Sophie, do you know who your ancestors are?"

"No. And I don't care. They don't matter. Only the here and now matters. My mother is an actress. Vivie will be starring in a movie in a few weeks, once the power's back on. I'm going inside out of this heat." Sophie flounced off and into one of the travel trailers.

The extended family waited and watched. These people listened to what Amber said. They took her seriously, except for Vivie and

Sophie, of course. No matter what happened, this group of people would survive.

George returned to the group.

She had to offer some hope to those who depended on her and Alex's scientific knowledge, as well as connections to General Nord. "I know it's difficult right now. We cannot guarantee when, or if, power will be restored. Your bodies will adjust, though it may take a generation or two. We can't unlearn a century's worth of lifestyle in few short weeks." Amber said.

She stood up and patted Danny on his shoulder. "You grow up and take good care of yourself. You matter. I'm depending on you."

He clasped the data disk in his hand.

"Go put that in a safe place now, you hear?"

He ran into the house, ignoring the dogs barking at his heels.

Amber picked up her backpack, and glanced around the clearing. It had once been a prosperous ranch. Dena's nephew, James had invited all his family and friends for his wedding to Gina.

Within hours of the wedding, a magnitude 8.5 had occurred along the Rio Grande Faults. It had done the unimaginable and bounced back and forth across various fault lines. No power for over a month. Phone towers demolished, leaving no ability to communicate long distance without short wave radios.

Dena's niece had travelled to Fort Sill to find out what was going on. She had sent a message back that everywhere was being evacuated up north. The plains were harvested early. Evacuees would camp in the empty fields.

The rest of the town had evacuated as directed. However, Dena and her family had been given permission to stay, since there wasn't enough fuel for everyone to leave. They would do their best to protect the homes and animals, and be ready to help their neighbors when, and if, they returned.

Amber reached for Alex's arm. "We have to go now. Please take care of yourselves. We will be back. General Nord needs us to help check the faults near another base."

Alex turned to George. "Do you know how to make that kitchen outdoors? Dena can cook outside, where it is cooler. And the house will be cooler too."

"We can sure work something out, even if it is temporary. We will do the best we can." George pointed to a few bushes. "Between them should be good."

"Thank you for the books. They will help. Our ancestors could do it. So can we, once we learn how." Dena's sister said.

"Take care." Echoed though the clearing from several of the people who had visited for the wedding, and now had nowhere to go.

Amber and Alex walked toward the horses.

"Why can't you stay?" A young girl ran after them.

The little girl was a bit younger than Dena's son. Amber squatted down to be at eye level. "Have I helped you and your family?"

She nodded.

"I have to go help other families too. Someday, you will thank me. When you grow up and marry."

She laughed. "I'll marry him." She pointed at the house Danny had entered.

"Perhaps. Perhaps, he might be more of a brother to you by then." Amber hugged her.

Fortune snorted, pulling on the reins at the front gate. She and Crispy didn't have a saddle or packs. A blanket and a bridle were all the control Amber and Alex would have.

Amber hoped they wouldn't miss the next town on her map. It was little more than dot. No one knew if anyone had stayed behind there. General Nord needed to know where people had followed, or disobeyed, evacuation orders.

Chapter 14

Elmore City, Oklahoma to Pernell, Oklahoma

Alex slowed Crispy to watch Amber ride once they were out of sight of the Elmore City ranch. She was beautiful, and had let her hair grow in the last few months.

It would be difficult to find safe water to drink and food to eat. Water had been the cause of the destruction of life as they knew it, through flooding when the Rio Grande rifted, and tsunamis as the quakes rippled around the world. Debris had rushed into once safe water sources. Oil and other contaminants had seeped into groundwater.

Amber gazed in front of her, intent on reaching Pernell by early afternoon. If Amber's earlier predictions occurred, the evacuations were all the more vital.

Pernell was rumored to have cattle on empty ranches without fresh drinking water. Many ranchers and farmers had died, or evacuated to escape the disasters, and abandoned their animals. Cattle would provide food to the remaining communities for years, if cared for properly. A field they passed contained several skeletons of cows picked clean by scavengers.

One skeletal cow still stood, barely. As they rode by, it dropped to its knees. Crows were quick on the attack, pecking at the cow's back. A pack of dogs lounged nearby, waiting, until the cow was on the ground. Mother Nature played out the gruesome scene in front of Alex. The healthiest, humans and animals would survive, allowing the species to continue. The ecological damage done by humans would begin to heal, perhaps in their own lifetime.

The sun silhouetted Amber's face. Her features were hid at the moment; though he knew them well. He closed his eyes a second, remembering the nights they had spent side by side. Somehow, the last quake had brought her back to her normal strong self.

He opened his eyes, and urged Crispy to catch up to Amber and Fortune. They hoped this distance run wouldn't be too hard on him. Alex glanced at the scars along Crispy's legs. They appeared okay, and hadn't reopened.

When they left the second Oklahoma City landfill, someone had dropped a torch. It startled the horses, and they ran until they could run no further. In morning light, the burns on Crispy's legs oozed a sticky, bloody mess. A two-day walk to Elmore City turned into three, to keep the horse as stable as possible.

"It won't be long. The fences make it a bit more than thirteen miles. Guess we could jump them," Amber said.

"Not with Crispy. Not sure I would if the horse had been trained for it."

She laughed.

Warmth spread threw him at the sound. He wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and kiss her. In normal times, only a few months ago, he would have waited on her to show signs of interest in him. Even now, he wouldn't push his luck, though, a dropped word now then and wouldn't be too much. He didn't want to die, or have to leave, without her knowing his true feelings.

A half mile down the road, a crater yawned across their path. They steered around it, and followed the road south. A group of buildings clustered close together, beyond a ranch-sized reservoir. Alex tapped Crispy to run ahead of Amber.

He didn't want her reaching it first. Some people who had stayed behind were scared. Soldiers from Fort Sill had reported raiders throughout the countryside. Some were escaped convicts from county jails. Even a federal prison had lost a few prisoners in transport. Hungry animals may have taken over the home and yard. If the owners remained, they might even mistake him and Amber for raiders.

Alex reached the first barn structure. The aroma of hay and animal dung, wafted through the opening. Sunlight filtered in through the doorway, wisps of dust and straw obscured his vision. Gentle mooing and snorting greeted Crispy's footsteps. Alex glanced around in the semi dark. Crispy nickered to the cows. These calm animals had to be well cared for.

Crispy lead the way. His nose would smell friend or foe.

A large cow loomed in the gloom. Not gaunt, or thin. Alex reached out to pat it, and it didn't flinch. It wasn't tied, or in a stall. It was free to roam to the pond for water. Bits of straw and hay were scattered all around. There wasn't much left in the loft above to filter down. These animals would be hungry in a few days.

Crispy side stepped, and rambled in the direction of a whinny in the back of the barn. A shaft of sunlight leaked through a ventilation window, to a place behind an open stall wall. He rounded the stall door.

A young mother horse stood against the wall, with a baby by her side. The baby teetered as if unstable on its feet. The mother horse eyed Alex. She tossed her head and snorted. The baby toddled forward and almost tumbled into Crispy.

Crispy snorted and stepped back, careful not to step on the baby.

Alex had to help them out of here to safety, if no one was home. No one might ever come back. Perhaps Danny, Dena's son, could take them in. They needed more livestock. Many had been sent north with the evacuees as food for the coming days. These should have gone too, and not been left to starve.

Crispy walked back to the door.

Alex glanced behind him. The baby followed, its mother close behind. Even the cows inched closer, as if expecting Alex to lead them to food. Food for people wasn't easy to find at the moment. Food for animals, even less so. There had been almost no rain and the grass hadn't grown.

Amber waited by the tree next to the large clapboard house. Fortune stood next to her, resting in the shade. Fortune lifted her head as Alex rode out followed by the other animals.

"No sign of people," Amber said. "I did a dust check in their kitchen."

"You shouldn't have gone in without me," Alex said.

"I checked both porches, too much dust. No one's been here for a week at least." Amber patted Fortune's face.

"Did you see any idea of who they were, or where they went?"

"There's mail from before the quake." She handed him an envelope. "It looks as if they took the evacuation orders seriously, and haven't come back. How are the animals?"

"Alive, and surprisingly well."

The baby horse trotted up to Amber. The mother horse nickered as it neared Fortune. Fortune nuzzled it, trying to smell the newborn.

"Is it a baby boy, or girl? And should we take them back to Dena, or on with us?" Alex tried hard not to laugh at the scene of the rambunctious youngster checking out a brand new world.

Amber reached over to pet the baby, and checked its underside. The baby pushed his head into her stomach, causing her to tumble back. "I think it's a boy. Sure has the strength of one for a newborn."

She stood up and dusted herself off. She shook her finger at the baby. "Wild one, back to your mother."

The colt glanced at her, and then trotted off to his mother's side.

Amber swung up on Fortune, as if she were used to it by now. Riding didn't make her near as sore anymore. At least she didn't mention any soreness as she had near the creek that one day.

"We are almost to Pernell now. We have to keep going. Let's see what's there."

A couple of dogs ran around the corner of the house. They followed in behind the cows and horses without growling. The dogs herded the cows, almost as if they knew the animals needed to go to a safer place. The two new horses fell in behind Alex, as the cows gathered in a circle with him and Amber in the center. It was almost comical. The dogs herded the people, cows, and horses toward the road to Pernell.

"You should have seen inside that house." Amber rode so close; her feet brushed his.

"What was so special?" His body tingled as her feet touched his.

Crispy snorted and let Fortune take the lead.

The trail was smooth at this point. Amber twisted around to talk with Alex. "There were two walls. No insulation. The plywood boards had cracks up to one quarter of an inch wide from floor to ceiling, except in the corners. The second inner wall was the same, and it slid on a track."

"A second inner wall? Never heard of that before. The whole wall slid?"

"The walls in each room slid. The width of a board or two is all. Why do you think they did that?" Fortune pulled her head almost free. Amber grabbed the reigns tighter, and rode on ahead.

Maybe Windy would know. If they ever saw her again. "Did Windy say if she was coming back this way?

Amber gazed straight ahead. "Not sure."

Alex gazed over the heads of the cows, trying to see what she saw. The land had changed. The terrain had shifted here as well. No one knew how many new tectonic plates or cratons had been created in the catastrophe. They might re-fuse over time, or like loose clippings, might push and pull, snagging the larger plates as they adjusted.

Amber had shown him a couple of different craton maps. Their jagged edges caused North America to appear to be a giant geological jigsaw puzzle. One intended for a toddler to practice hand coordination. She had even taken one map and cut it up. The cratons had spilt new crustal cracks as they created new mountains, rivers, and lakes faster than previously recorded in any known civilization.

Scientists who stayed behind to examine changes couldn’t document them as fast as they occurred. Data was obsolete by the time it was uploaded to the few remaining satellites and radio stations with power. At this rate, local change was all that mattered to most people, as the geological and human rifts within the nation widened.

Even though two months had passed since the quakes began, vegetation hadn't re-grown here. No rain had fallen to quench the thirst of the disturbed foliage. In the ravine, a line of trees had dropped to their branches, shearing off lower ones, and would appear quite different for decades to come. Treebrellas, abandoned umbrellas buried up to the ring, with the canopy pointed to the sky, was the best description he could find.

The image startled him, as a nightmare likeness he had seen of women in dresses falling down off a tall building flickered over it, for a second. That day, it had horrified him. Later, he heard that one of the women had lived, though scarred for life. Such fleeting nightmare pictures were a sign of the times.

They had already seen many dead bodies in person as well as in media. Falling buildings had killed thousands of people. Several thousand more were overcome by billowing ash clouds in New Mexico and California. Hundreds died in riots and looting. No one thought it would happen here. However, it did. Of course, it was happening globally as well. Mother Nature's fury of earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis knew no political, or geological, boundaries.

They rode down the length of the ravine until they came to a house. Once, Amber would not have let the opportunity to explore an obvious fault line escape her. Now, she steered away from it, without looking. He knew the feeling all too well.

At the house they stopped. He didn't know if they had reached the town. No other house was in sight. On the porch, someone was sprawled out, sleeping on their back.

He hopped down and handed Crispy's reins to Amber. "I'll check it out."

Alex reached the porch and the person didn't stir. As he stepped closer, he could tell the individual was a male, and covered with ants. He felt for a pulse and there was none. Feet away was a large wooden door. It was so close. The dead man was outside alone.

Chapter 15

North of Tuba City, Arizona

Livia sighed as the truck chugged to a stop. Because of the fear of a nuclear reactor meltdown, most people had fled the quake-ravaged regions. There didn't seem to be any fuel left, anywhere. No electricity to run the station pumps if there had been. Airwaves were empty too, with no television or radio broadcasts for days. Cell phones didn't work, since the tower generators ran out of fuel. And the short wave radio they had been given had shorted out.

She slid out of the seat, still favoring her ankle a bit. After two months, it had mostly healed. If something happened out here, there might not be another clinic or doctor to help. In fact, there didn't appear to be a building in sight.

Corbo grabbed one bag. His face and fists clenched.

She grabbed the other, and her crutches.

"Which way?" Livia searched the barren wasteland around them.

He grunted and walked down the road.

They each had one water bottle left, held against their chest to keep the temperature constant.

Livia pulled out her map, remembering when Amber used to do the same thing. Maybe she remembered them as better than they were, before they knew what was happening to the land. Without any way to communicate with Amber, or her parents, she was alone with Corbo. She would never see them again. Corbo needed her more than they ever did.

Livia hobbled behind Corbo. They would reach Tuba City soon. It shouldn't be much further. The road appeared to wave and weave as the sun pulled the bits of moisture out of the asphalt, and into the air. The droplets would fall somewhere, perhaps at nightfall.

Corbo didn't speak.

Her mind drifted to piecing together what her own mother and Varanda had told them. Eduardo's sister had in-laws on a reservation in southern Arizona. That was where he had gone to meet Adora, Anna, and Jon. Corbo would try to reach there, if he could.

Memory of her mother's tears saddened Livia. She didn't know if her mom had loved Eduardo more than she had loved her dad. First loves could be like that. Her own first love had married another, and she had never forgotten, or forgiven him.

Corbo's Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon, grim as ever, had refused to tell them anything. Desi had stormed off on his own to find his brothers who had gone search of their distant family.

Aunt Anna didn't know anything about where her brother-in-law and Adora met. Livia's mom didn't know anything about Adora's family. A quick and secret romance and planned marriage. No wonder there had never been any contact. Armed with her mother's notes, and Aunt Anna's vague memories, Livia tied their stories together with the words of Varanda, to figure out where to search for Corbo's father.

Livia's low energy hadn't bothered her while resting at her parent's deli, or even with Corbo's family. Tiredness could be a side effect of the ankle injury. His Aunt Anna had asked her if she were pregnant. At first, she had laughed. At a rest stop a few towns back, a corner store was still open. The pregnancy test came back positive. One more reason to stay with Corbo. Now his father would have a son, and soon to be grandchild, amidst the ripping apart of the nation.

Corbo been so quiet lately, grabbing his attention wasn't easy. He wanted to find his father, and find out why he hadn't been searching for him. Livia hoped his father could be a part Corbo's life. What this new pre-modern life would be, Livia wasn't sure.

A stabbing pain, down the full length of her leg startled her. A tendon was fighting the extreme exercise. Too much sitting and worrying. She hadn't walked much since the cast had been off. This was could be a long trek, several days at least. Walking that far was out the question. Corbo was already far ahead. Being a burden to him wouldn't help in his search. She would have to have a horse, or some other means of transportation.

"Hey Corbo. Wait up." Livia shouted.

She paused and waited, breathing heavily in the early morning sun.

Corbo trudged back to her. "What is it."

"I, I can't walk that far." Livia replied. "I haven't used my leg enough. My ankle is still sore. I'm afraid. It's not strong enough."

Corbo glanced around at the landscape.

There wasn't much, only a few stringy bushes. Nothing to help her walk better. Crutches weren't designed for long distance travel. In fact, they were wearing out already, and the bottom rubber pieces needed replacing.

"Where are we?"

"Near Tuba City." Livia said, "I'm not sure what's here."

Corbo snickered. "A lot of musical sounds, just what we need. Wind whistled through the body of that old truck the whole drive here. Why don't you stay with the truck for a few minutes? Let me look around, and see if I can find anyone alive in this area."

He picked her up, carried her back, and sat her in the shade beside the truck.

No words were said on the way back as she clung to his neck. Her face felt hot, as she willed back the frustration. Someone, or something, had to be left in Arizona.

"I'll be back soon," he said.

Livia waited.

Corbo would be back. He strode out of sight down the shimmering roadway.

Even though she had always considered herself a country girl, she had never spent this much time alone with the desert wildlife. The last three months, living mostly outside was so different from her life before.

A life indoors with air conditioning, running water, and so many other things she taken for granted. Things that didn't matter anymore. Could she would even remember how to set the thermostat, if power returned? In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she slept under a roof, unless it was that nap at Los Alamos.

Josie and Nathan had always said she could do anything she wanted. They only said it after an accomplishment, not before like her parents did. When her parents said that, she felt hopeless. Now, she was hopelessly trapped because her broken ankle hadn't healed. A burden to the one person she most wanted to help. Why he was different than all the thousands she had helped before, she didn't know.

Sweat dripped off her forehead and landed in the nearly empty water bottle. Corbo had been gone a long time. The shade had

moved away from her. A short crawl away, she stopped in the shade. Before long, the shade would disappear under the truck at midday.

She dozed off. A rattling sound soothed her. It wasn't the truck. Livia twitched awake, sat up straighter, and looked around, shielding her eyes from the blazing sun. The heat rose in waves, bending the light. Mirages of water shimmered along the horizon. An image of a city, or even a building would be welcome.

Livia stood up, and gingerly set her foot on the ground. Holding onto the edge of the truck, she hobbled around it. A horse and rider stared back at her. She blinked, wondering if the vision would disappear. There was an air of the plastic Indian about him. Slick painted skin, a total lack of modern clothing, holding a feathered stick. Rattlesnake tails dangled from the horse's bridle.

"Lo," The figure said.

Livia glanced up at the impassive face above the horse's head.

She stepped forward and reached to touch the horse's face. Two more horses were tethered behind the apparition. If only they were real.

The nose was real. Velvety dry, and air moved through it. The horse snorted, then blew warm air into her hand.

"Thank you," Livia rubbed the horse's face.

"You are?" The figure said.

"I'm Livia. I can't walk far. My ankle is still weak."

"Hm." The man stared down at her, watched, and then rattled the stick. The feathers continued to sway, even without a breeze.

Livia reached up to touch the feathers. "Hawk feathers. Please, don't do a rain dance until Corbo can come back. We need help."

"Why did you come here?"

Corbo's story should be told by him. They had trusted Windy. This apparition was vaguely familiar; perhaps he could be trusted. "Please, can we sit in the shade, and I'll tell you."

Livia patted the horse's nose. It took time and effort to hobble to the shady side of the truck and sit back down.

The man slid off the lead horse, and walked over beside her.

With her eyes closed, she let her Italian background speak through her voice and hands. She saw each event as it had occurred. The story wasn't long; many details didn't matter at the moment.

The person before her leaned against the truck with crossed arms resting on his chest, and no apparent emotions.

Livia began to doubt this person would help her. If only, she had a name to call him, to connect to him, or Corbo.

"Windy once said, 'Sharing your real name gives it power.' Can you help us? I won't ask if I can't call you something."

The man didn't respond.

Livia reached out to the feathers, and almost touched one. It was different from the others. A similar color and shape. It was special somehow. The sun blended the colors of the feather. Her breath caused it to sway in front of her hand. "Is this a kestrel feather?"

A flash of a smile crossed his face. "You may call me Kestrel. Tell me about Windy. What would she want you to do?"

"Windy would want us to find Corbo's father. She made that clear. No matter what, we have to find the reservation his in-laws lived on."

Kestrel, a living history lesson was a reminder of what she had known, and lost, in the present. That past she had tried to teach others to leave behind.

"What will people do now? We don't know how to live like the past. It's been forgotten."

Kestrel tapped the stick on the ground, and the bridled horse came forward. "Come. We must catch Corbo. I have an event to attend, and can't go with you, or I would."

Livia stood gently, and let Kestrel help her onto one of the horses. She pulled her bag up behind her. "He went on down the road."

The words were barely out of her mouth before Kestrel had leaped on the lead horse, and urged it forward as fast as it could go. She gasped and barely held on. Riding could be a wonderful adventure in good times, and a way to keep from cramped in pain with her sore ankle. They should catch up with Corbo soon.

They rode until well past midday.

Corbo appeared on the horizon, little more than a dot. His determined gait had kept him walking well past any distance she could have managed on her own.

Livia didn't know he could walk so fast. The approach of pounding hooves didn't disturb him. Not a good sign at all. They

raced past him, as she tried to slow the horse. Her crutches banged against the animal's sides.

"Corbo, wait. We have help."

He glanced up from the road to see her sitting high above him.

"Sorry, I didn't hear anything, what happened?" He glanced at the other horses. "Who is that with you?"

Livia's cheeks warmed. "This is Kestrel, like Windy. He promised to help us."

Kestrel passed a rope to Corbo. "Take the other horse. A few miles on, a cluster of homes ignored the evacuation orders. Something about some rules."

Corbo laughed as he took the rope. "Sorry can't help it. You look the stereotypical Native American. If things were different, I'd think you rode off a movie set."

"I know. Pieces of tribal clothing from a dozen different tribes." Kestrel shook the stick. "Some people think it may confuse the spirits. I'm not so sure. More mongrel to me. We are all a mixture of peoples, whether we know it or not."

Corbo climbed on the horse. "People see me as Mexican, and I guess I am. I didn't know I was actually born across the border. And then, to find out my father isn't Mexican? Who is he? I have to find out who I am. Will I ever be legal?"

Kestrel steadied Corbo's horse. "You will be as legal as anyone else someday. Mother Nature is making many changes. I will see you again."

Kestrel tapped the horse with a stick and was gone. In seconds, horse and rider were out of sight to the west.

"We never got to say thanks," Livia said.

"Better go on," Corbo said. "We are way behind."

Chapter 16

Tobia, Arizona

Corbo urged his horse forward, not paying any attention to it. Something was different about Kestrel. His eyes and frame brought up memories he couldn't quite place. Some time maybe, he couldn't remember. The horse slowed down, and Corbo glanced around him.

Livia rode up beside him, breathing hard.

Love wasn't something they shared. It was more a mutual agreement so they could both have what they wanted. Livia was his only hope. More now than before, when he thought he had been born here. His dream of a normal life with a good paying job, and a wife, grew dimmer every day.

Before long, buildings appeared in the distance. A group of twenty houses nestled together. They were out of place, with no other buildings nearby. Cactus and scrub bushes were there nearest neighbors. Roofs shimmered in the pounding sun. No yard fences in sight. Two decorative wooden fence sections, with a cactus on each side, framed an avenue. Simple, and requiring no upkeep in the desert. It was strange sight, like a city neighborhood plopped out in the brush.

Without glancing at Livia, he urged the horse to a fast walk. They had to have food and water for themselves, and now additional water for the horses. It used to be easier to fuel vehicles than slow horses. Now, horses might be their only transportation, other than their own two legs.

Nothing obscured the view of the homes and vehicles neatly lined up. Chickens in lawn tractors pecked the ground in safety from coyotes. No dogs or cats lounged on porches. The desert hadn't crept in, so the people must either still be here, or recently moved on. Though no one was in sight.

He had to trust Kestrel. The homes were closed up, with no open windows. It was too hot to be indoors if they didn't have power.

"Hey you. Go back. Get out of the neighborhood!"

Corbo glanced around trying to figure out where the voice came from. At the end of the street, a head peeked out of a door. An arm stuck out, and waved them back.

The horse trotted on down the street. Curtains swayed in windows, and other people opened doors. Corbo reined in at the gray brick house were the first person had shouted at him.

The man at the door waved him away.

"What's wrong?" Corbo asked.

The man glared at him. "This is a private subdivision. Our homeowner's association doesn't allow farm animals here. None are allowed on the street anytime."

Corbo laughed and pointed at the chicken tractors. "You have chickens in your front yards. Those are farm animals."

The man stepped out of the door. "No. Chickens are pest control, not farm animals. They eat the bugs, and even keep termites from destroying our homes. Horses are too big to be here. There is not enough room, or food for them. They're not welcome. Go away."

Corbo had heard enough. He knew he wasn't welcome anywhere. The horse turned, and he slid off. "Livia is hurt. She needs food, and we need water. We won't stay. Please help us first."

The man glared at them, and then glanced around at his neighbors. "It's against the rules."

His neighbor stepped up. "We haven't seen anybody except each other in two months. An hour wouldn't hurt anything."

Another woman from down the street walked up. "Horse manure is good fertilizer. It could help us grow some of our winter crops."

She smiled at Corbo. "Zooney added a new rule that we have to grow our own food since the stores are no longer open. All we have is the little we bought before everyone in the city ran away."

"Not much food here," Zooney said. "I guess they can rest for an hour."

Corbo helped Livia off her horse, and tied the reins to the door rail. The horses didn't pull or tug on the reins, though one snorted. They should be fine for an hour.

As he stepped into the open door, the blast of icy air hit him like a punch in the face. Something he had never known at home growing up, only the broken down ones at school. There had been

no air conditioning since their stay at Los Alamos. It took his breath away, and his teeth almost chattered. Goose bumps appeared on his arms. He rubbed them to accustom them to the cold.

The neighbors followed him inside behind Zooney.

Several children swarmed excitedly around the two horses. They pawed the ground, and snorted. The adults stood inside the door and watched out the window. The children patted and rubbed on the horses; who waited calmly under all the attention. Zooney pointed Corbo and Livia to chairs at a small kitchen table. He turned his back to Corbo and Livia while another man stepped forward.

"I remember when we used to have horses when I was a kid. They were so nice to ride. I'm Fred by the way, and my wife is Fanny." He reached out to shake Corbo's hand as he nodded to a woman with a dishtowel.

Fanny watched as a child climbed up on the rail to hug the nose of one of the horses. "We could have camels. Riding them isn't that much different, I wouldn't think. It would be nice to have camels. After all, they can go for a long time without water. We could trade with other people, travel the land as our ancestors did. It can be done."

Fanny twisted the dishtowel in her hands. "We could have a fun trip every week to find water. A picnic lunch and the kids laughing and playing, that would be great."

The people's eyes shined as they chuckled. They didn't know how to have fun. Not that Corbo was sure what was fun anymore. He glanced back at Zooney.

Zooney took a bucket off the counter and walked to the back door. Corbo followed. Right outside the door was a well. The man removed the cover, and let the bucket down.

"It's a little lower every time. The aquifers are being drained."

Zooney pulled the bucket up, poured a little back in, and covered the well. The cover would keep out bugs and the heat from the sun. They would have water for some time, if the quakes didn't damage them. Amber and Alex know more about underground water systems than he did.

"We chose to live off the line, and all have wells. They have to last." Zooney said.

Back in the house, Zooney sat the bucket on the kitchen table. He used a container to dip a little bit out, and a funnel to fill Livia and Corbo's water bottles.

The people crowded around the table.

Corbo drank about half his bottle of water.

Livia's eyes drooped, arms slack against the table.

He worried she might not have the strength and stamina for the trip. She tired easily these days, and that could be a problem.

Laughter squealed outside. One of the horses had likely let go of a fertilizer plop. Nothing he could do about it now.

There were no visible cats, and no barking dogs. Chickens clucked in the background. There was something special about this place lost between time. It seemed unreal, almost as if they had some of the best of both worlds. They were missing something. Something important, maybe an understanding of what mattered in life.

Some of the neighbors muttered behind hands held to their mouths.

Corbo shifted in his seat. "So tell me 'bout yourselves. What's this place is called?"

"This street is called Tobia. Tobia rather than Utopia, because we can't have everything. We found sometimes you can't have both the good and the bad. We decided to make our own special unique culture," Fanny said.

"We wanted to take the desert, and try to make it sustainable, and make everyone follow the same rules so that it would be fair to everyone. I don't think it's working. Solar power, though wonderful, isn't always reliable."

She rested her hands on the water bucket. "We don't allow fences, or pools, or most farm animals. It isn't as easy as we thought it would be to be fair to everyone."

Murmurs of agreement sounded from the other adults in the room.

Zooney held up his hand. "We don't have standard natural gas power from town. We do have buried lines that bring us a little reserve power. They don't work anymore. No landlines, cable, or satellite. It's always been enough. We worked in town, and came home to rest with few distractions. Now, we have less than our neighbors on the reservations."

The horses outside pawed the ground; and children laughed.

The adults glanced from one to another and back at Zooney, shifting nervously, as if afraid to speak before him.

So much loss. So much taken for granted, for too long.

"We don't have much in some ways. Without so much stuff, we thought we would have so much more. Not growing our own food to conserve water, we limited ourselves. We are in the desert after all, and every drop of water is precious here."

Zooney reached over and picked up a small container, filled it, and watered a few plants in containers on the counter. "So now we are going to try small gardens, using well water. We hope our wells are deep enough."

Another woman said, "Even though the water table is low, we hope to be able to feed ourselves. Many of the farmers out here, tried to feed small countries on the desert water tables. The desert can't grow for everyone. Now, that farmers are gone, we hope we can raise gardens. People can grow enough food for an entire year on one piece of land, not much bigger than their homes. We hope to as well, since we have spring, fall, and winter growing seasons."

"Yeah, makes sense. Nothing could ever be perfect." Some days Corbo wished he could be perfect. It would make life a little easier. Of course, if everything was perfect, people wouldn't even know how good their life was. He knew these people wouldn't share any food. There wasn't any to spare.

Someone behind the woman said, "What we have here has worked for ten years. I hope it will keep working."

"So what are you two going to do?" One of the women asked.

Corbo knew he had to tell them something. The real story wouldn't make sense to these structured people. He couldn't tell them the whole truth. Enough of the story to make sense to them wouldn't be a lie.

"We are going beyond Phoenix," Corbo said. "We know we have a long trek ahead of us, without fuel for our vehicle. Can you help us reach there?"

Fanny shivered. "You do know, don't you, that you will be going near a nuclear power plant? No one knows if it's safe."

"We are hoping to find someone with a shortwave radio, and maybe they'll know if it's safe." Corbo fingered the fringe on his

pack. In three months, it had almost worn out. Hopefully, it would survive the trip.

"If they are at the plant, they might not broadcast. We don't know what channels they would be using, even if we did have a short wave radio. If the communications team forgot to change the channel during an emergency, everyone would know something was wrong. It was supposed to be the safest nuclear power plant ever built. I worked there once," Fred said.

No one anticipated the continent splitting apart when it was designed. Perhaps the continent was settling for a bit, as he hadn't felt any quakes for a few days.

"Where you going in Phoenix?" Zooney asked.

"We're going beyond Phoenix to a small town. We're not even sure if it's been evacuated. We hope to find my father," Corbo said.

"Then you understand why we stayed," one of the women said. "During the beginning of the quakes we stayed because, well our rules say we have to stay. We cannot abandon our homes. They're all we have."

"Sadly, some people would consider what you are doing as neglecting your children's safety," Livia said. "I understand. If I had a home, I'd feel the same way. I have parents. I've never felt at home with them. I'm not sure where my home is. Someday, Corbo and I'll find it together."

Corbo reached over, and put his arm around Livia. She was so sure of him. He wasn't so sure of her. Of course, he would stay with her for the convenience of having a nationality. He couldn't imagine a place that would allow them to stay, as one of their own.

"While you're there in Phoenix, check on the animals in the zoos. There are several along the way, there's Heritage Park Zoo, and Phoenix has Wildlife World, as well as the Phoenix Zoo. I'm sure there's others. There have to be." Fanny rung her dish towel, and stared above them at the red birds in the wallpaper. "You can send the camels to us, if they can't care for them."

Corbo laughed. "What do you want me to do? This isn't a vacation trip. Their caretakers are there, aren't they?"

"Animals trapped can't feed or water themselves. They have rights too." Fanny picked up a dish and wiped it with her towel. "They shouldn't have to die that way. It's the middle of summer. This

heat wave could kill them all. No way a few caretakers could provide food for them without deliveries."

"Sure. We will be glad to check on them. If the zoos aren't out of our way," Livia said.

Those poor animals, they were as out of place, and out mind, as him. Antarctic penguins would be scorched. The African elephants might survive, if not penned in. As for the others, most had grown too depend on humans for food, shelter, and water. Their survival might depend on their ability to revert to instinct, over training.

Better to change the subject. No time to dwell on such thoughts. "Have you planned how you're going to grow food, without much available land?"

"Well, we don't have anything. Our neighbors on the reservation have tools and some seeds. They've offered to help us. I think we're one of the few non-Native American communities left out here. By not having fences, we hoped to appear open and welcoming to them. They've ignored us. We aren't sure if that's good or bad. Then we decided to ask for help. To ask for seeds, a few tools, and hope." Zooney said.

Corbo picked up his now empty water bottle. "Sir, if you have a few extra water bottles and little food, we would appreciate it. We don't know how far we may have to go to find someone else who may have food and water. Stores may be out there, without anyone to run them, food left to rot on the shelves. If we took it because we were starving, what would people think? Is it more wasteful to let the food rot? I don't know the rules anymore. They've all changed."

Zooney waited a few moments. "The rules haven't changed. I think everything will be back in order, in a few weeks, or months. It's a temporary change. Soon, everyone will come back pouring into the city in the distance. Stores will re-open, and other than the few people who died, life will pick up where it left off when they all abandoned their homes and jobs." Zooney moved a few containers on his counter.

"We will follow the guidelines we have set for ourselves, loosening them a bit, until everyone comes back, and life can return to normal. Rules make life easy. Follow them, and everything works out. Ignore them, and chaos reigns."

Corbo knew better than that. Rules could make good guidelines. Useful boundaries that had to be expandable when needed and agreed to. Sometimes, rules had unintended consequences.

"We may not have much. We do have a little. Enough until we can grow some food. If not, our neighbors on the reservation may have to help us." Zooney pulled out a few bottles of water, and a few packs of dried food. He handed them to Corbo. "Here is some jerky from the reservation, and some travel biscuits. You should be able to go about twenty miles tonight. There are water reservoirs in different places. Some of them aren't safe to drink from. Do you have filters?"

"No," Corbo said.

"Here," Zooney tossed him some coffee filters. "They're not what you really need. They will at least keep dead bugs out, and you never know what else. They may help a little. Good luck."

Corbo stood up. "Don't want dead mosquitoes in our drinking water, that's for sure. We may be back someday. Good luck growing gardens for the first time in the desert."

He helped Livia stand up, and they walked back to the door.

The adults crowded up around him.

Their children had wondered off to a nearby chicken coop to play with feathers and stones.

He helped Livia up onto her horse, and then climbed onto his own. It would be a long ride to the next town. They didn't know if they would find anyone there alive, dead, or otherwise.

Chapter 17

Pernell, Oklahoma to Alma, Oklahoma

An older two-story farmhouse with a wide railed porch loomed in front of Amber. A man sprawled on the ground by the door. An odd place to sleep, out in the open, in the heat of the day. She glanced around to see what else there was nearby, other than the cows, horses, and dogs behind her. No other people or animals in sight.

Alex squatted on the dusty wooden porch next to the person sleeping there.

Amber slid down off of Fortune, and walked up to the porch. She tied Fortune's reins to the rails.

Alex sat up.

A few feet away, a heavy wooden door was shut.

"What is it? What happened?" Amber stepped closer. A trail of ants scurried to and from the body on the porch. An odor, rather like something out of a deep forest wafted toward her. "There's no hope is there?"

"Not for him," Alex said.

Amber walked up to the door and tried the handle. It was locked. She knocked.

A clicking sound came from inside the window to her right. It creaked open. The head of an elderly woman peeked out.

"Hello." She held the window sash.

Amber took a deep breath, and tried to ignore the body by her feet. "We're trying to find Pernell. Is this the outskirts of town?"

"Who are you? Why are you looking for the town? Everyone left a long time ago." The woman's hands shook.

Something shifted behind the woman. It could have been dust, or something else.

"General Nord said that we should go to Alma, after we left the last place we were at. We found some cows at an empty ranch. The house had sliding walls. Do you know who the animals belong to?"

"Perhaps. I'll let you in, and we can talk for a few minutes." The woman's face disappeared. The window scraped shut.

The door creaked open, only half way before it stuck in a groove in the floor. Little sunlight entered the room.

Amber stepped around the body and entered the door, with Alex right beside her.

The woman left the door open. She motioned to a couch near the window. "I rarely had visitors, even before the catastrophe. Tell me bit more about yourselves."

Amber wanted to know about the dead person on the porch. Who was he; and why was he there? Any answers had to come from the pasty and frail woman rocking in front of her. She told her story to the woman.

Sounds in the background distracted her, scratching, bumping, and snickering. The woman nodded her head continuously, and at the loudest disturbances, glanced at the door leading further into the house.

Amber finished story. "Tell us about you."

The elderly woman nodded with her eyes closed for a few minutes. She opened her eyes and stared at the open door. Then she turned to the window.

What she saw, Amber didn't know.

The woman gazed around at the door leading further into the house. "My son died. He brought his children here. It's his body outside. I can't do anything with it. We will all die soon. There's little food, and little water. I ran out of medication days ago. There's none left, anywhere. Without it, I don't stand a chance."

She put her face into hands and sobbed. "I don't want my grandchildren to die. I can't take care of them. If you would, please take them and keep the safe."

Amber reached out to the woman. "Surely, it's not that bad. You can live without your medication."

"No," the woman said. "I wish I could. I figure I have a few hours to live, if that. And then what will happen to them? No one is left near here. I wouldn't have survived the evacuation, even if I had money to go."

The woman stopped rocking, opened her arms. "Children come out, please."

The door opened, and two raggedy children skipped into the room. Long untidy hair, and stained clothes, that were obviously outgrown. The door swung shut behind them.

"This is Tam and Joe. Tam is four and Joe is three. They can tell you about the house and the cows you found. That was their uncle's farm."

The old woman smiled as she leaned back in her rocking chair. The broken chair would rattle apart if she weighed any more.

The children danced and capered about the room. Like butterflies, they didn't stay in one place long. Finally, they settled against their grandmother's knee.

"Who are you?" The girl asked.

"We're Amber and Alex." Amber bent down on one knee, and reached out to the little girl. "Tell me what you like. Where do you want to go?"

The little girl sidled over to Amber, glancing back at her grandmother. She cupped her hand and whispered into Amber's ear. "To find my mom. I don't know where she is."

Tam skipped back to grandmother's knee, and stood watching Amber.

Amber waited on the grandmother, whose rickety chair creaked through the silence.

"The children's mother is missing. We aren't sure where she went. Or if she will be back. There are no people left here. You must take the children, please. I'll leave a note in case she comes looking for them."

Amber didn't want to take the children. After all, they belonged with their family. Someday, maybe she could find their mother, since their father had died. She wasn't ready to take on children.

On the mantelpiece were several framed pictures. One stood out, with the children's father in it. A tall woman stood beside him. The woman reminded her of her mom. Maybe these children would not be so different from her. Maybe in Alma someone could take them. Later, they could be sent back to Elmore City, if their mother never arrived. Gina would know where to place two more orphan children. The lost kitten had found a home quick enough.

She walked back to the grandmother and sat down. "Joe tell me about the home where we found all the cows."

Joe flopped on the floor, and crawled a little closer. "What was it like?"

Alex sat down beside Amber. "It was a big house with a big barn, with a horse, and a baby horse."

"The walls were different," Amber said. "The grooves went up and down, instead of side to side."

Joe laughed. "That's Slider House. The walls slide. Air comes in, heating and cooling. It's a fun place to be."

"They can leave the house open at night, without worrying about robbers. Wind whistles through the house at all hours of the day and night." The grandmother clapped her hands and the children climbed up beside her. "Now children. I want you to go pack your bags, what you can carry on your back. Hurry. Be sure and take a blanket, a brush, and a change of clothes." She patted their backs.

The children jumped off her lap, and scurried out the door. It slammed shut behind them.

She faced Amber and Alex. "You are their only hope. I'm fading fast. You must go, before dark." She coughed.

"The children can't wait. They'll die alone if they stay here. Take them, please." She held out her arms to them, pleading with her eyes.

"We can't leave you to die alone," Amber said. "And your son needs to be buried."

"Even if you could find a few pills; it wouldn't be enough. There's no one making them anymore. Even if there were, there's no way to get them here. I've lived my life. I'll be watching. Don't worry about our bodies."

The children clattered down the stairs.

"Come help us find food," Tam said.

Alex waved to Amber. He would talk with the grandmother.

Amber followed Tam and Joe into the sparse kitchen. The counters were empty. A few cabinet doors swung on rusted hinges. A wood burning stove took center stage, next to an ancient deep ceramic kitchen sink. Amber ran her hand along the ceramic edge. It was beautiful, with chunks missing from dishes falling in too hard. Plenty of room to wash the whole soup pot inside the sink, instead of outside on the counter. A nice place to raise a family.

Tam opened a cabinet door. "Here is all we have."

Surely, there was something somewhere else. A half-empty box of crackers sat near the back of the cabinet.

"We ate the last canned food this morning."

Amber took the box of crackers and searched further in the dim light from the window. A little dust, nothing more. "Let me try a higher cabinet."

Amber opened the other cabinet doors and saw dishes, pans, and containers in the crowded spaces. The last cabinet contained one can of beans. They were a few days out of date. She put it in the bag.

The children followed her back into the front room.

"Is there anything, anywhere else, maybe?"

"Yes. I'm not sure how good. Downstairs," the grandmother pointed at a small door in the wall. "There were home canned goods from better days, there might be something left." Her rocker slowed.

Amber didn't want the children to see their grandmother die. "I'll hurry." She took a candle, opened the door, and crept down the stairs. Along the wall were lined shelves, full of empty jars. In a dark corner a jar of pickled meat, and a jar of green beans hid behind musty cobwebs. Amber grabbed them, wrapped them in her clothes, and packed them in her backpack. The pickled meat she wrapped in her pillowcase.

Upstairs, she bent down her knee. "Tam and Joe if you come with me, we will find you a safe place to live. There may not be a lot of food this year. Next year, there will be plenty."

They both nodded solemnly.

The grandmother hugged them close, and patted their heads. "You be good for Amber and Alex, now. Mind them well. Remember everything you've been taught. Go now, out the back door, as family."

Her eyes pled with Amber to hurry.

She tapped the children's backs, and escorted them through to the kitchen door. Alex came behind her, closing the doors.

Once outside, she gave him a quick glance, and smiled at the children. "Wait here. Alex will bring the horses around. There's one newborn, and it's too young to ride. We will take will your grandmother's quilt on the porch swing, and put it on the colt's back."

She reached over to pick up the quilt that lay folded on the swing. It was a double wedding ring pattern, in pretty colors. Much like her grandmother's quilts, the tiny hand stitched pieces had

been made of old clothes. So much use and memory in these pieces, much like her pillowcase. It was all the children might have to remember where they came from.

Alex walked around the corner with the horses, dogs, and cows.

She picked up the quilt, carried it in her hands, and laid it over the colt's back.

He tried to kick it off.

The children laughed. Tam reached in her bag, and pulled out a sash.

Amber took the sash and tied it around the colt. He would have to carry things now, and grow up fast.

Alex sat the two little children up on the mother horse.

The mother would not leave her baby behind. Amber tied her lead rope to Fortune's bridle, and followed Alex. Staying off the roads would make it easier on the horses. They would edge back closer to the road, once the children could no longer see the front porch of their grandmother's home.

Almost out of sight of the house, Amber heard a sound, and felt a breath of wind. She glanced back and could see nothing. The dogs herded the cattle on around them, keeping the four horses in the middle of the herd. Alma was still quite far off by horseback. They'd know by nightfall if anyone remained there.

Chapter 18

Alma, Oklahoma

Alex pushed the small group until almost dark. Alma was little bigger than Elmore City. Missing it would be dangerous in these times. General Nord's messenger had relatives there who had remained in case he needed them at Fort Sill. As the sun sank in the west, the first few houses they had seen in an hour appeared on the horizon. He urged the horses on.

The dogs barked, and the cattle sped up a little. They would need a pasture, and water soon. Who knew what else, as Alex had never imagined himself a cowboy. Perhaps, a cowboy was his future, now that volcanoes and earthquakes had ripped the technology infrastructure apart.

"Do you think anyone's there?" Amber whispered.

There weren't any signs of people. No smoke from fires, or smell of cooking food. Grass grew in cracks on the road.

The dogs herded the cattle into an open gate set back from the house. An acre or two of land fenced in with a garden between it and the home. There would be enough grass to feed the cows and the horses tonight. Tomorrow, other plans would be arranged, if necessary.

Alex slid off Crispy and closed the gate behind them.

Amber had stopped Fortune nearby. She ran after the mother horse and led her back to the gate. They helped the children down, and took the quilt from the baby colt.

With the gate careful closed behind them, they walked toward the house. Nearby, the dogs panted patiently. They would keep predators away for tonight, anyway. Amber hadn't found much food at the grandmother's home, there'd be none to share with dogs. Hungry dogs might attack a weak cow, if no other food could be found.

Alex knocked on the door. Voices sung on the other side. He checked for a doorbell, and didn't see one. There was a bell shaped knocker on the door, so he knocked loud and hard. Singing was replaced by rattling and crashing, followed by thump, thump, thump.

He glanced at Amber, not sure what was going on.

Something slid behind the door.

The door creaked open.

"Yes." A man held an iron fence railing.

"Hello," Alex said. "General Nord recommended we check out Alma, and make sure everyone here was okay."

The man didn't move.

"Along the way, we found Tam and Joe, as well as a horse, colt, and a small herd of cattle. The dogs herded them into your yard. I hope that's okay," Alex said.

"Sharon, go look out the back window, and see if what he says is true."

Alex stepped back and put his arm around Amber's shoulders.

The man didn't open the door any further. He didn't close in their faces, either.

"Sorry to be so rude," the man said. "With all the looters about, we have to be careful. We can't let anyone in without knowing them."

"Can the children at least come in and go to the restroom?" Amber asked.

Tam and Joe peeked out around Amber's side.

"Sure. Mary can take these two, and you may go also." He pointed the rod at Amber.

Amber had one hand on the shoulder of each child as she walked around the man, who blocked the doorway.

The man had not even shared his name. His face was pale, worry lines visible. It was no surprise after the messenger's warnings.

"Are there many people left in town?" Alex asked.

The man's face didn't move. No reply.

"I'll sit and wait on the porch." Alex sat and twiddled his thumbs. He didn't know how long the children might take, and Amber herself probably needed to go as well. This unnamed man's good graces would be difficult to reach.

The man stood in the doorway, staring out ahead of them.

Alex glanced back at the street to see what his host watched. Three men with rifles stood the other side of the street.

"We told you and your family to be gone." One of the men shouted.

Alex didn't dare glance back now. He stood up. "Who are you? Why do you want these people gone? Do they not live here?"

The man took one-step back. "Who are you? You weren't here before."

Alex stared at the lead man. "My name doesn't matter. What matters, is my connection to General Nord. I would suggest you give your name, and why you are evicting this family."

Alex stepped closer to the man. He reached into his backpack, not taking his gaze off the men.

They stepped back.

A good thing, because Alex wasn't sure he could easily grab his handgun. Although he had never fired it, he hoped the sight of it would startle these bullies.

Rustling sounds behind him could mean an ambush. Hopefully, the home owner was about to stand up for himself and help save his own home.

"Do you have names? Do you have a reason to attack this family?" Alex kept talking to distract the bullies.

One of the men laughed and held up a finger for each point. "Of course we do. These people have food, and a home. Their garden is producing well, and we need food. They don't need a home here. They only play music. Now get out of our way!"

Three against one. The odds weren't good. No wonder the man answered the door with an iron rod.

The family hadn't hurt Alex. He was not about to stand aside to let these people be attacked. Especially with Amber, Tam, and Joe inside the house.

One of the men pointed his rifle right at Alex. "Now go, or I'll shoot."

Alex had no idea if their guns, or his, were loaded this point. They could be bluffing as much as him. He turned his gun toward the man. "I suggest you tell me who you are, or leave."

The man scratched his feet on the ground. One laughed at him. Rays of the setting sun brushed the tops of the men's heads.

Alex had to fight back a grin. The scene reminded him of the set of an old Western movie. Of course, in the old Westerns, someone always saved the day. Hopefully, the man of the house had a gun, and knew how to use it.

Alex stepped forward.

A second man lowered his gun, pointing it at Alex.

Alex lifted his gun, pointing it toward the men. "Have you no response? Are you ashamed of who you are?"

The men laughed. "Why should we tell you? We have as much right as you to be here. We have more right to this home. After all we can grow food for ourselves and others."

"At what cost?" Alex said.

"Doesn't matter," one of the men said. "People will pay what we ask. They have to, or starve."

Something moved silently behind the men. A slithering shadow beyond their sight turned into two dogs. He was sure they were some of the dogs who had travelled with him and Amber. Perhaps the other three were behind him, waiting.

Alex pretended to lower the gun. "What makes you think people will survive until you have grown new food? Where do you expect this family to live in the meantime?"

One man laughed. "They're so soft. They can live in the desert, like everyone else. Their songs would put the coyotes to sleep."

"I'm sure you could find an empty house with a farm, and even crops in the field. So many people evacuated. Keep looking."

The dogs wiggled closer. Another shadow moved to the right of the men.

"Why would we go anywhere else? This place is fine. There is a pond in the back for water, a few trees, and an old plow."

Ignore the dogs, before the men noticed them. Keep the men talking and let the dogs do the work. "Are there more than three of you?" Alex said. It was getting desperate now. These men wouldn't listen to reason from anyone.

"We have a few more. Backup, of course."

They were not going to tell him the truth, and he wasn't going to be able to talk them out of what they wanted to do. He didn't want to fight. Fighting might be the only solution to convince these men to leave this family alone.

One step forward. "How many families are left in town?"

"Seven or eight of us, plus dislocated ranchers." The man adjusted his rifle, and twitched his trigger finger.

"This town had two thousand inhabitants. That means almost one thousand houses. Why can't you choose an empty one?"

"We don't want none of them. We want this one. Let this family choose one of them empty houses." His maniacal laughter filled the air as he pointed the gun at Alex.

Amber and the two children were behind him, in that house. These men's accomplices might barge in the back, and Amber couldn't protect herself. The man of the house didn't act capable of protecting himself and his own family.

The shadows of the dogs crept closer to the men, almost in striking distance.

Chapter 19

Tobia, Arizona to Cameroon, Arizona

Livia hurried her horse along. This neighborhood sounded too structured. Scared almost, of change. Change was coming whether they liked it or not. Adjusting wouldn't be easy for them. Helping others change their lives had always been her specialty. Stability, like they had, hidden under their rules, was something she had never known. If there had been time, she could stay, and teach them a thing or two. She longed for that security, and the comforts lost when the power went out for good.

Livia pulled out her map and smiled. Amber knew the languages of the geologic features; and had despaired at the lost knowledge caused by roads and cities built through features Livia couldn't even recognize. She looked at maps differently now too. Geologic locations weren't only a place to a hide someone, they were a history book she didn't know the language of.

Something caught her eye as they travelled south. The road went straight toward the San Francisco volcanic fields. Laughing, she realized Arizona had something in common with New Mexico and California: geologic features with similar, or the same, names.

Ancient volcanic flows were a short ride away, along both sides of the road. Arizona volcanoes were listed as dormant, although hot springs abounded in certain areas of the state. If there had been more time to talk to, and learn from Amber and Alex, she might have known how to read the signs of previous quakes, as well as recognize the signs of an impending one.

The horses walked beside the road to save their shoeless hooves. Monotony set in with little to see or hear. Time crept, as the summer sun beat down on them and the fields, empty of visible wildlife.

Livia dozed as her horse followed Corbo. She didn't mind following him. He was after all the one she intended to stay with. He didn't act pleased with her, and she wasn't sure why. Finding his father would bring them both answers and peace. And the baby. The hope, the dream, that the child would have a home with both of them flooded her with joy.

As the sun began to sink, they reached a small circle of houses and stores. Deserted, like everything else they had passed. Abandoned houses could provide protection and cover, as long as vandals hadn't broken in and damaged them. Some owners may have even left food behind. If they took a little food, the people might not even notice. If they returned for it at all.

At first glance, the dusty buildings appeared deserted. Hope glimmered at the sight of lights flickering in three windows, and out the door of the building to their right. It would be a fire hazard if no one was there. Or a danger, if raiders or looters were there.

Corbo handed the reins to Livia and slid off his horse. He walked up to the wooden door and knocked. Minutes passed, and the door creaked open.

A man with a gun peered through the opening. "What do you want?"

"We need a place to water the horses, and sleep tonight," Corbo said.

The man glared at him, and then glanced over at Livia. "Okay. The horses can go around back to the small fenced in area. Wouldn't be okay for more than one night."

Livia led the horses around the side of the building. Desert scrubland didn't provide much grass for food here. No trees or people in sight. No shade to break the hazy heat. Nothing new to see had muddled her thoughts.

She opened the gate and led the horses into the fenced in area.

They trotted by her, springing forward to the nearest clump of grass.

Livia covered her eyes in the early dusk, searching for a place and a way to water the horses. A spigot was on the side of the building, in the corner, next to an old tin tub. She turned it on and hoped the tub was safe for the horses to drink out of.

The horses, with a few snatches of grass in their mouths, walked up and pushed against her. Sweat and sand odors overwhelmed her as she patted them both. They reached for the water to drink, and then dribbled it all over her dusty, dry skin.

Livia laughed as the streamlets left clear lines on her legs. She hurried back to the gate and latched it securely.

Corbo wasn't waiting at the front door. Radio static sounded inside.

She pushed the door open, and walked in.

"No new earthquakes," the voice said.

"Are you sure?" The man that had met them at the door leaned closer to the machine.

"Yes, Tangle. None locally, not in the last twenty-four hours or so."

The man glanced up at Livia, and waved to her. "Come. You need to speak."

Livia walked over to the man sitting behind a tiny wooden table. "Who is it?"

"It's Dr. Evan. Corbo said you know him."

Livia took the microphone. She didn't know what to say. "Hi Dr. Evan. What can you tell us?"

The static grew louder and softer. "Livia, glad you are there. We need you to check out the San Francisco volcanic plains for us. We don't have any contact with the equipment that is there. We need it to be set back online. Corbo can do it."

"Where did he go?" She covered the microphone.

"Had to take a break." Tangle pointed to a door hanging on rusted hinges.

"Dr. Evan what can we do? What do you need? Do you think it's dangerous?"

Static blared in and out. "Of course it's dangerous. Everything is dangerous these days. Be sure and take a radio with you. Tangle can give you one. Have Corbo contact with it when he is closer."

Livia handed the microphone back over to the man. "I guess your name is Tangle."

"At least on radio," he grinned. "I prefer not to use my real name. It's safer."

Tangle talked to Dr. Evan.

Livia walked around the room, full of old electronic equipment, and wires everywhere. She had no idea what most of it was. An old phonograph begged to be touched in a corner. It would work without electricity. On the turntable was a record with a vibrant sheen, as if it had never been played. A rotary phone stacked on top of a teetering pile of phone books. She almost touched so many artifacts. The fake wood, and the real wood, pieces of a past that was long gone, while trying to remain present, crowded the room to overflowing.

"Livia, sorry to be gone so long." Corbo walked up behind her. He took her hand. "Your turn."

He showed her the way through the jumbled maze of closet rooms to the restroom. The water dribbled from a faucet older than both of them. And the electricity worked, sort of. The light over the sink was probably almost as old as she was, with a dark yellow glare that made everything sickly pale.

As she finished up and walked back through the maze of closets, the odors overwhelmed her. One smelled like moldy bread. Another like stale socks and shoes. A third had someone asleep in it, and it was the only almost clean and organized corner in the place. She stumbled through the clogged walkway back into the electronics room. The hum and hot wire odor struck her nose even stronger than when she had come in the first time. The horse odor must have been washed off her hands.

"You can take this set in the morning. How early will you be up, and ready to go?" Tangle held an electronic box out to Corbo.

"As early as we can. We have a long way to go. I hadn't planned on stopping. Going by horseback is slow." Corbo took the box and sat it near the door.

"Get used to it. Until the grids are back up. Then, it may take months for the oil refineries to work." Tangle focused on the monitor in front of him.

"How are you getting power here?" Livia asked.

Tangle glanced at another monitor. "We have solar for the moment. One cell is wearing out. Not sure how long it will last."

He swiveled around in the tattered chair to face her. "Once it goes, the short waves won't last long without a replacement. No power, no communication."

"Where can we fix something to eat?" Corbo said.

"One of the rooms has a tiny kitchen. Try not to wake my relief. He will be awake when you leave in the morning."

"Is another house open to sleep in?" Livia asked. With so many conflicting odors in here, she didn't want to eat, or sleep, inside.

"Nope. None have power, that's why we are camping out here." Tangle pressed the keyboard and didn't even glance back at them to see if they stayed, or left. The screen flickered as numbers scrolled up and down.

Livia took Corbo's hand and led him out the open door. She glanced back in.

Tangle focused on his screen and keyboard.

Corbo closed the door gently. They went around the side of the building to munch the jerky they had. This was better for now anyway.

"I don't think Tangle's been outside for a while. The odor in there is a bit much," she shifted her pack.

Corbo laughed. "I've smelled worse. If you'd rather sleep next to the horses, I don't think he'd notice."

"They would wake us if there was any trouble." Livia reached for his hand and staring deep into his eyes. "Why did you call Dr. Evan, if you didn't want to help him?"

Corbo unlatched the gate. "Tangle already had him on the line. He wanted Tangle to leave his station to the other ranger. Tangle didn't want to leave, so he was sure glad we walked in."

Livia latched the gate firmly from the inside, and set their packs against the building. Sleeping bags unrolled easy, and hooked together. She snuggled up next to him. It was good to have time to themselves. Nights together could be comforting. She reached for his hand beside her.

He kissed her hand, and held it close.

Chapter 20

Cameroon, Arizona to Sunset Crater, Arizona

Corbo woke with something poking him in the back. He reached to move it, and realized it was Livia's foot. Heat washed over him as he remembered last night. The last rays of sunlight had washed across her beautiful face. He had traced her face with his fingers. Even with her body next to him, he could only think of finding the father he never knew. He had to know why his father had never returned to Livia's mom. Beautiful and sweet as Livia was, he couldn't break the fear that they weren't traveling fast enough.

Livia didn't ask for much. She wanted him happy, and tried in every way she knew to make it so. This baby was a way to keep him legally here. That was the only reason he could of that she had decided to continue the pregnancy in these tough times. Her parents wouldn't want her to have the baby, he was sure of that.

Dawn would light up the sky soon. He reached over, and ran his finger along her chin.

A horse snorted beside him, and Livia rolled over, snuggling closer.

The horse snorted again, bumping the water bucket nosily.

Corbo laughed, and sat up. "Okay fella, I'll run you some water." He rummaged in his pack for a flashlight. After he filled the trough, he patted the horse on the rump. "You better drink your fill. It'll be a long day."

The horse snorted, and nosed the cold water. The other one came closer, searching for the water as well.

Corbo burrowed back into the sleeping bags. It was chilly in the desert night air. A good snuggle with Livia might be what he needed to warm up, if she was awake. He rolled close beside her, resting his arm across her side. Her eyes shone in the starlight. Holding her close, he kissed her nose.

The first rays of dawn peeked over the horizon when Corbo sat up. "We have to go." He twined her hair on his finger.

"Sure. I'll pack our stuff. Pick up the radio we are supposed to take. Do you know how to use it?"

"I think so." He straightened up.

A few minutes later, he was back with the radio and instructions. Tangle's friend had grinned at him. "You might want to be careful out there."

Livia had the horses ready to go. They had eaten all the grass in the tiny yard. Hopefully, it would be enough food for the day. He helped Livia up, and then climbed onto the other horse.

According to the map, they would reach the Sunset Crater by nightfall, if they were lucky. Each hour that passed drained him. The sun showered heat relentlessly. He imagined what it must have been like for his father, somewhere. If he had died in the raid, he might be buried in an unmarked grave. Or, his father may have suffered amnesia. Maybe his father's sister would know. If he could find her.

The heat was relaxing, perhaps too much. The horse jerked him awake as they entered rougher terrain. He glanced around, unsure if they were off track. A road was to his right. If this was the correct place, Dr. Evan said there would be a rock cairn nearby the road. At first, all he saw was smoke, or maybe steam rising. This was not good. There shouldn't be any steam or smoke. There wasn't enough vegetation for a real fire to last, so it could only mean one thing.

Having gazed into the heart of a newly opened fumarole with Alex in the San Andre's, he didn't want to do it now, alone. Corbo didn't have a COSPEC to determine which gases were being released, not that he would know which ones were dangerous, and at what levels. It was bad news, and could be dangerous for Livia. He had to make her stay here for her safety. Could she defend herself against a coyote if needed?

He had to go ahead and find the cairn. Dr. Evan said he would walk him through whatever he had to do.

"Livia, you stay here. Let me go on."

"I'm not staying behind."

"It isn't safe. Those fumes can kill. Or cause problems for you later on."

"They can hurt you too. I'm going. I can do anything a man can do."

He held out his arm to stop her as she tried to urge her horse forward.

"No Livia. It's too dangerous. If you want to have a healthy baby, wait here. Even here may be too close. Hide behind that scrub brush over there."

Tears dripped down her cheeks. The words had stung. She wanted a baby, and would never do anything to hurt it. Not if it meant their future. She sniffled, rubbed her eyes, and walked the horse over to the scrub brush.

He frowned. There was no need to be so harsh. She did tend to rush head first into things, and think later. He scanned the horizon searching for the cairn. Perhaps that pile of rocks closest to the first bit of steam was what he was searching for. He almost took the horse to stay with Livia, then thought better of it. He might need a quick escape if the place decided to blow.

"Livia, check the map for a place to stay. I don't want to stay here tonight."

She ignored him, and went on around the brush. Normally, he would go to her and try to calm her. There wasn't time right now.

Corbo turned the horse toward the pile of rocks. His horse snorted and sidestepped. He patted her neck, and she calmed down. If Livia, and Mother Nature, calmed so effortlessly, life would be easier.

Chapter 21

Alma, Oklahoma

"Hurry Tam."

Tam went into the restroom.

Amber held Joe's hand and waited.

"It won't flush," the girl said.

"Don't worry about it now. There's probably no water pressure. We'll ask the family in a few minutes."

Tam came out and took Joe's hand, "I'll take him."

Amber smiled. Tam took good care of Joe.

She waited until it was her turn. It was a tiny, clean restroom. Tam was right; there was no water flow. There was a bucket with almost clear water beside the toilet. She poured it in, and the suction pulled the water down. The sewers would fill soon.

Amber took the bucket with her; it would have to be re-filled. She heard a high static sound coming from the front of the house. With the children's hands in hers, she tried to locate it.

There was no electricity in the dusky kitchen. Sharon sat at the table, surrounded by the candle light. A small radio sat on a nearby counter.

"Thanks for bringing the bucket in. Mary can fill it at the well."

Amber sat the bucket next to the back door. "Anything interesting?"

"Sure, we listen to the radio every night. Sometimes the few neighbors we have want to talk, and it's safer this way. I miss evening porch sings."

Amber sat down and examined the radio. "What's the power source?"

"We have a car battery, recharged daily from a small solar power cell. It doesn't give us much, only enough to run the radio for a few hours."

Amber touched the dials. "I wish we could reach General Nord. We are going to Fort Sill, where he has relay stations set up."

"I can't reach him. I can reach Chad. And he can reach family at Fort Sill."

Shouting from outside interrupted Sharon. "Oh no, the raiders are back. They want our house."

"My name doesn't matter," Alex shouted.

Amber reached for the radio. "What's the station?"

Mary grabbed the radio, turned the dials, and picked up the microphone.

The shouting grew more intense.

Static crackled as Mary searched.

Amber pushed Tam and Joe toward the back door. "Hide under the table."

She ran to front door with the radio and microphone in hand. "Chad, whoever you are, come help at Sharon and Mary's home! We need General Nord now. Please come in." The static continued to click and crackle.

The static crackled, and the voice came on. "Who?"

Amber screamed. "Please contact General Nord now. Come to Sharon and Mary's."

"What's that sound in the background?"

Amber reached the man with the iron rod at the door.

Sharon ran into the hallway. "The raiders shot at the house."

The static on the radio clicked over. A man's voice came online. "You are at Sharon and Mary's?"

"Yes. Please help us."

"Can you take the radio outside?"

"Yes." Amber stepped through the front door.

The homeowner hid beside the doorframe.

Alex was out in the street, pointing his handgun at three men.

They stood laughing, and jeering, aiming a rifle at his head.

Amber set the receiver as loud as she could.

A scream to Alex to be careful would distract him. She tried to stand in his line of sight. As soon as she was sure he had seen her, she spoke into the microphone.

"General Nord reinforcements are where?"

"Reinforcements are on the way." The voice was Chad. Of course, these raiders wouldn't know that.

The men stopped laughing, and jeering.

Barking dogs ran around the corner of the house shepherding two more men. They herded the five men together in a circle. The men pointed their rifles at the dogs.

Amber had no weapon. If the raiders shot the dogs, they didn't have much hope.

"I repeat reinforcements are on the way." The static on the radio blared.

The men danced, cursing and yelling at the dogs, and pointed their rifles to the sky. One went off.

Amber dropped the radio, and covered her head with her hands.

Alex crawled to her.

Dogs continued barking.

One man screamed.

The dogs jumped, growled, and barked at the men, pushing them tightly together.

The men dropped their guns and ran. They didn't make it far.

The lead dog jumped on the lead man. Down they all went, like dominoes.

A mechanical screech echoed over the volume of the dogs and men.

Amber covered her ears and tried to determine the direction it came from.

Four motorcycles flew into view, and screeched to a halt in front of the men and dogs.

One of the motorcycle group whipped out a rope, dropped his bike, and ran to the raiders on the ground. The dogs kept the raiders down, while the new arrivals tied them up.

"That'll do it." One man said.

It had happened so fast; Amber hadn't had time to think. She stepped back, unsure of these new strangers. The leather, tattoos, and rough looks didn't say much positive about them. Her knowledge of the stereotype of hard rock musicians left her with doubts for the safety of all of them.

Even the woman with them appeared strong enough to knock Corbo down. That would take a lot of effort. The woman hadn't balked at standing on one of the raider's chests as she tied him up. She walked around and picked up the shotguns. Her finger traced each trigger.

"Ralph, call us sooner next time." The biker woman yelled.

The homeowner sat down the metal rod he carried. "You know I don't like violence."

The woman laughed. "You think these raiders would let you get by without violence? They would have killed you and not thought about it. You have to know and speak the language of the people trying to carry on a conversation with you. You know only words, and airy songs."

She waved her hands at the tied up men. "These men don't know those words. They know body language, and fear. You don't even know body language. Learn it, or you won't survive!" She walked over to her cycle and tied the shotguns onto her bike.

"Chad, I'm back to headquarters." She stood her bike upright, twisted the handles, and drove off in a cloud of dust.

Chad stood near Amber. "She's a bit defensive. Don't be afraid of her."

Amber held the radio so tight her fingers turned white.

"Good idea to ask for the General. He doesn't like my metal band." He smiled at her. "Uncle is glad that I can handle myself as well as he can. The town jail'll have to do for these villains, for now."

The two rough men standing nearby scowled and grabbed four of the raiders, jerking them up on their feet.

Chad watched as they walked the four men out of sight. "Ralph, we'll be back for our bikes in a few. Then you can introduce us to the two new people. If uncle knows them, they can't be all bad." He laughed as he shoved the man he was holding down the street.

Amber shivered. Chad sounded tough. Not as tough as that biker woman. She hoped he never shoved her.

Alex picked up the radio and took her hand as they walked back to the house.

Sharon stood in the door, holding Tam and Joe at her side. Tears streamed down her face.

"Who are they?" Amber asked.

"The bikers are a metal band, who can't practice without electricity. At least our music doesn't require electricity." Sharon tried to smile through the tears. "Come on in. Mary is fixing some food. There should be enough for all. Chad'll come back, and may bring Jerry with him."

Amber handed Sharon the radio, and took Tam and Joe's hands.

Sharon led the way back to the kitchen.

Mary carried food in through the back door.

"We have to cook outside now." Sharon placed the radio on the counter. "It's strange, and refreshing." She sat down and waved to an empty chair.

Amber pulled it out and sat down.

Tam and Joe stood at her knees.

Alex stood behind her.

"They aren't as bad as they look. It's not the first time they saved our lives." Sharon's hands hid her face.

"I know we need to find some kind of middle ground. They need us, and we need them. Our religion won't allow us to stand up for ourselves. We have to die first." She sobbed.

Ralph walked up to her. "Dear, it's too late for us. I don't know if we can change. We never did work to build our physical strength. Maybe Mary." He took Sharon's hands and pulled them away from her face.

Mary walked in with a bowl of potatoes.

"As long as she doesn't need leather jackets and tattoos," Sharon said.

"Aw Mom, I won't. At least, no tattoos. Leather jackets may be all we have, if we have to hunt our food and clothes."

"My brave daughter. Will you stand up to our religion to survive?"

"Mom." Mary thumped the bowl on the table. "There is nothing in our religion against wearing leather. In fact, all people wore some version of leather, and covered books with it, for centuries."

"With a temper like that, you haven't stood up to those men?" Alex said.

"Oh, I've stood up to Chad and Jerry. Those raiders, they don't look at a female as a human." Mary glared at him and walked out of the house.

Ralph laughed. "Our daughter didn't inherit her stand-up-for-it-ness from us. Must be from when she stayed with her aunt-in-law so much when she was young, and we travelled the gospel circuit. It may help her survive the future now."

Mary waltzed back into the room, and plopped a baked rabbit down on the table. "I'll get the plates in a minute. We better pick what we want before Chad comes in. This is barely a snack to him."

She raced through the house to the back with a bucket of water.

Amber stood up. "I'll get the plates, where are they?"

Sharon pointed to a cabinet.

Amber prepared the table.

Everyone piled the food on plates. There wasn't much left over.

Mary hurried back in, her cheeks flushed. She had changed to a pretty shirt, more open in front than the other one.

Her mother passed the mashed potatoes. "He's okay to learn protection from. Don't try for him."

Mary glared at her. "I'll do as I please."

"Be sure you really want to, if you do," Amber said.

Mary stopped midway of dipping the potatoes on her plate. A tear slipped down her cheek. "I love him as much as Jerry does. Maybe more. I've known him longer."

"Mary, I'm here." Chad shouted outside the back door.

Mary blushed as she dropped the potatoes on her plate. "Come on in."

He wore a nice shirt and nice jeans, with no jacket. The tattoo on his arm was gone too. Maybe a lot of it was a cover to make them appear scarier than they were. The ploy had sure worked on her.

"Fake tattoos?"

"Sorta. Now tell me about you," he said.

Tam patted her hand.

"Alex, you'll explain, won't you?"

He began their story as Amber took Tam down the hall to the restroom.

"Stay with you." Tam whispered as they walked back.

Chapter 22

Alma, Oklahoma

Amber and Tam's voices drifted back up the hallway.

"So you see, it's been a long few months for us. We are helping General Nord check for hot spots," Alex said.

Chad grunted and chewed his rabbit meat.

"Aren't you far away from where the earthquakes and volcanoes are?" Ralph asked.

Mary picked up empty dishes.

"Not intentionally. We were in Arizona, when a massive quake hit. Our pilot was on her way to her wedding near here. Now, we are traveling to Fort Sill to see the damage at the fault lines there, and report what we see along the way."

"Is there much damage?" Sharon asked.

"In places." Amber sat back down. "Lots of new faults, and new micro-plates forming. Chad, you said you know General Nord?"

Tam climbed into her lap.

Joe reached over to her from Alex's lap.

Chad swallowed some water. "Sure do." He checked his watch. "He should have some support here soon. On good roads, it would take an hour to reach Fort Sill from here. Not sure about now."

Mary turned around from the sink. "You aren't going are you?"

Chad finished chewing. "Nope. I'm here to protect your family, and a few others. I'll be sure the raiders are handed over to them."

He pushed back his empty plate. "Alex, why don't you come with me? You can come back for Amber and your kids in a bit."

"Well, they aren't mine, or hers. We found them," Alex said.

Chad stood up. "They act like yours. All attached to you and everything. Come on."

Alex stood up, and sat Joe in the chair, pushing it closer to Amber. "You don't mind, do you Amber?"

She finished her last mouthful of food. "Be careful Alex."

Mary frowned as they left.

Once outside the house, Chad laughed. "Mary is so much fun."

"Do you like her?" Alex asked.

"I love her very much. Her parents aren't happy about it."

"What about Jerry?"

Chad's laughter brought him to a standstill. "Jerry? She's as much interested in guys as I am."

His laughter died down. "The fear of Jerry keeps Mary on her toes. Gives her spunk, when nothing else would. Jerry knows, and plays along."

A good idea. Maybe someone could help convince Amber she needed a partner, preferably Alex.

Chad stopped in front of the town hall building and opened the door. "In you go. They'll come here."

Alex entered the dimly lit building. It wasn't much of a town hall. In fact, it reminded him of an old sitcom his parents used to watch. There was a desk where Jerry and the other two bikers sat across from a holding cell with the raiders in it. The door slammed shut behind him.

"Chad'll be back in a few. Sit." Jerry pointed to a chair.

Alex couldn't tell what was real, and what was fake about the bikers, and maybe that was the way they wanted it. They talked about their music. At least, that’s what he thought they were talking about. It was hard to know with the talk of beats, roads, and other terms he couldn't pronounce. Of course, if he sprouted volcanic terms they'd feel as out of place as he did right now.

"Sun bounces along the rim, would work."

"No, we can't reach the deep bass for that anymore."

"What about."

Alex gave up trying to understand and watched the raiders in the holding cage. Without their guns, they didn't look so menacing. Perhaps, they were scared now.

One of them noticed him, and rattled the cage bars. "Hey let us out. We can protect you from them. They aren't listening."

Sure enough, the bikers were so busy talking; they appeared to not notice the man.

Alex glared at the raider standing at the bars. It was the man who had fired at him, and missed. "Sorry. Only one way I'd let you out."

"What's that?" The man said.

Alex crossed his arms on his chest took one-step forward and shouted. "If they carry all of you out dead."

Silence filled the room. The raiders didn't move in front of him.

"I think I'll sit outside and wait." Alex said to the bikers.

Jerry nodded at him, with a hint of an up turned lip.

He stalked out the door, and sat on the steps. This anger was unexpected. Never had emotion run so deep and provoked an outburst before.

The man had tried to kill him. Perhaps that was why. It was disturbing to wish someone dead; even if they had threatened him and the woman he loved. There, he had said the words, even if they were in his head. He loved Amber and would do anything to protect her, and even those two children who had so quickly attached to her. He clenched his fists together.

"I do love Amber," he whispered. "Now, I have to tell her. I hope she feels the same."

Chad and Mary walked toward him in the moonlight holding hands. Chad had tossed his biker jacket back on, and somehow replaced the tattoo on his neck. Maybe it was a string tattoo that stuck on with glue, like a sticker. They walked closer, talking so low he couldn't hear them.

Better not to disturb them. They needed some time to themselves. Alex stood up, and walked ahead of them, down the moonlight beam.

He stopped at the corner, not wanting to become lost. The stars drew his attention skyward. In the last few months, he had seen more stars than he could remember ever seeing. As the clouds of smog cleared, more were becoming visible. This was what he wanted to give his children. Moonlight and stars to see by at night. A brighter daylight from the sun. Not the smog of the cities he had known. By winter, with its crispness, the light would be brighter. So bright, they would be able to see almost as well at night, as in the day. The sun was almost as beautiful to him now, as the volcanic lava had been a few months before.

A pair of stars on the horizon grew larger. Alex wiped his eyes. The illusion didn't end. A slight rumble sounded, as the two "stars" were flanked by more lights. They were approaching headlights. He ran back to the building steps.

Chad and Jerry were there waiting for him.

Mary was nowhere in sight.

"Safe?" Alex asked.

"Hope so." Chad held out a long walking stick to Alex. "Know how to use that?"

"Sure do," Alex said.

"It may be General Nord's troops. Hold in a protective fashion, not threatening, until we know for sure."

Alex stood beside Jerry. Chad leaned on the other side. All held sticks, barring entry to the building.

Four vehicles pulled up around them, stopped, and pointed their lights at the building.

Alex took a deep breath. With fuel shortages rampant, they had to be reinforcements from General Nord.

The door of one opened, and a person in a camouflage stepped out. Could be military, or a hunter. Alex let his stick shake a bit.

The person behind the headlights shined a flashlight on each of their faces. "Alex, Chad?"

"Your name?" Chad said in a husky voice.

The light went back to Chad's face. "Corporal Puma. General Nord said to be watching. Much trouble going on here?"

Chad relaxed and leaned against his walking stick. "Enough. I think this is the worst of the lot. A little infighting over solar power. We try to keep enough to practice our instruments from time to time. Nothing we can't handle. Come on in for the captives."

Chad went to the door.

Jerry stayed behind, and so did Alex. They each chose a side of the door.

The men and women who had come for the captives stepped out of the vehicles and walked inside.

Noise inside didn't surprise Alex. Apparently, the raiders struggled as they were led out of the holding cell. Two men came out the door, with the ringleader of the group, handcuffed and yelling.

"You can't make me. I have rights." He glared at Alex holding a stick up beside the door, visible in the headlight beams. The raider glanced the other way, searching for an escape.

Jerry stood there. She lifted her walking stick to block the raider's hope of escape.

The man slumped, and let the two military guards escort him to one of the vehicles. They pushed him into the back of the vehicle, rather like an old-fashioned jail truck from the movies.

Alex would have laughed if the situation wasn't so dangerous.

The other raiders came out no problem. The one the dog had jumped on earlier today had an obvious limp.

After they were all in the truck, and securely locked in, Corporal Puma turned to his fellow soldiers. "Watch them and be ready. Be back soon."

He walked up to Alex, Jerry, and Chad at the door. "Let's go in and talk a minute."

Alex's knees quivered. He led the way in, using the stick to hide his quivering knees as the desert night chill began to soak the landscape.

Alex sat back down, this time on the floor, as there weren’t enough chairs to go around.

Corporal Puma glanced at the small group gathered in the room. "Do you think there are any more raiders?"

"We haven't heard of anymore at the moment," Jerry said. "That doesn't mean more won't show up later."

"We can hold these men a few days as an emergency situation. You five can take care of yourselves, and the other families?"

"With some help. Please. We need them all together, instead of spread across the whole town. We don't want anyone to have to give up their own home. I think we need an emergency declaration, to protect them. No one can go out alone in the day, and all be in a safe home by night fall," Jerry said.

"That way, too, we won't fight over the solar power. There will be more to go around." One of the other members said.

"Everyone here agree?" Corporal Puma said.

The group murmured in agreement.

"Okay. An order can be written up and executed tonight for the safety of all. Give them the right to check on their homes each day, if they so desire. It'll wear off soon." The corporal set a pad of paper on the desk, and wrote in the lantern light for a few moments. With a final flourish of the pen, he handed the page to Jerry. "Off you go."

Jerry took the page; and her friends with her, leaving Chad and Alex in the room.

"Okay Alex, are you and Amber ready to come to the base? What happened?"

Alex clasped his hands around his knees. Where to begin the story?

"We made it to Gina's wedding in Elmore City. After the evacuations, we followed orders. Pernell was our first place to check. We picked up two orphaned children there. Now, we are here."

"Ready to go?" The corporal tapped a pen on the desk.

Alex hesitated. "Well, I'd like to be. I don't want to be any closer to the quakes with the children."

"Neither Sharon or Mary will take them?" Chad asked.

Alex shook his head. "I didn't feel comfortable asking. Amber may have after we left."

"Alex," Corporal Puma sat his pen down.

Alex looked up.

"Do you like the children?"

"They are good kids."

"Does Amber?"

Alex remembered the dinner. "They adore her. Half a day and they're in her lap."

"This event will bring out thousands, perhaps millions of orphans. Best to leave them with whom they are happiest at this point. No time for the niceties of the no longer existent social services. We will go get them." Corporal Puma pushed his chair back from the table.

Alex and Chad followed the corporal out.

They walked down the street. "Amber is going to be upset at leaving Fortune behind again."

"Mary and Jerry will take good care of her. Maybe you will be back soon." Chad slapped his back a little roughly, as they approached the house.

"Maybe you can send them to the ranch. Gina would appreciate them."

"Soon." Chad stopped when the porch came in view.

Sharon, Ralph, and Mary blocked the door.

Amber stood with Tam and Joe in front of her. Her arms rested on their shoulders.

"Amber, it's time to go." Alex took her hand.

Joe took one hand and Amber the other. They walked toward the vehicles, and didn't look back.

Chapter 23

San Francisco Mountain, Arizona

Livia led her horse to the bushes Corbo had pointed to. Frightening emotions overwhelmed her these last few weeks. Too much death and abandonment. Everything and everyone she had known were long gone. That was all it meant. However, she wasn't so sure. Corbo needed to stay safe to find his father. If he went off alone, she couldn't save him.

The horse settled into the shady place. Better to take care of herself, and their unborn child. Corbo wasn't abandoning her. He would be in sight, and not far away at all. A yell could reach him if anything went wrong.

She slid off the horse, and let him graze on the shrubbery. Not much nutrition for a hungry horse. Maybe she could find something on the other side of the tall shrubs.

Livia limped around the bushes. "Corbo. Come quick."

The cloud rising from the mountain in the desert scrubland had been hidden behind the bushes and hills. Now, it spiraled upward, searching for a break in the clouds. There was far more smoke than a campfire, and not spread out enough for a wildfire.

She trembled and pointed.

Corbo rode up beside her.

He groaned and stared at the mountain in front of him.

"It's the San Francisco Mountain. It could blow us to San Francisco." Corbo slid off his horse and pulled out his pack. "I have to call Dr. Evan now. He may not want us to be any closer."

"How far is it?" Livia had always lived for danger in the past, before she met Corbo. Now, she wanted safety. To stay with him, and to safely bring their child into the world.

Corbo pulled the radio out. "About ten miles. Too close for comfort if volcanic ash billows out. Plus."

He adjusted the dials on the radio. The static was loud. At last, he reached the channel. "Dr. Evan, come in please."

Static, escaped with an increasing tempo. "Just a minute," a vaguely familiar voice said.

More static, slower this time. "Corbo?"

"Dr. Evan, it's not good. Haven't found the cairn. Did find the San Francisco Mountain."

"You sure? Sunset Crater is the youngest." Static broke into the reception.

"I'll have Livia check the map. If we haven't gone the wrong direction, it should be. Maybe the last quake moved the old mountain back over the hot spot."

Livia unfolded the map, and it trembled in her hand. She didn't think her hands were shaking. With an upward glanced, her hands did begin to shake.

The smell of sulfur hit her nose. Weeds blew as if there were a moderate breeze. A low rumble intensified in the distance, and passed under their feet. She screamed. The map tore down the center, as it covered her nose.

"What is it?" Dr. Evan shouted.

Corbo reached to comfort her, holding her close.

The rumbling stopped, for the moment. Tendrils of steam drifted away on a high-level breeze.

"Sir. Not good. The steam appears to be dissipating. It was a minor quake, for sure." Corbo glanced at her. "Sir, should we get out of here? I don't want Livia here. I haven't seen any wildlife."

"How are the horses?"

The horses tugged at the branches they were tied to.

"Skittish. Not running, yet."

"One minute." Static rang in the air for a few minutes.

"You are a bit south of multiple faults. What does the air quality feel like? Are you watching the mountain?"

Little spurts of steam rose, reminding her of a teapot about to boil. This was not where she wanted to be. She trembled and stepped back to comfort the horses.

"Dr. Evan, it's puffing like a sleeping dragon," Corbo said.

Laughter came across the static. "Never heard it stated that way. You two don't know enough. I wish Alex and Amber were there."

People talked in the background, discussing what should be done as the static broke through the communications.

The horses tossed their heads, and tried to pull away.

Corbo turned his horse away from the steamy mountain.

Livia stuffed her map fragments in her bag. She patted her horse's head and pulled her close. If she could only calm her own beating heart, maybe they would calm as well.

"Corbo, it's too dangerous, and too late. Go back to the road and head south. We'll send someone for you." The static took over Dr. Evan's voice. If he said anything else, they missed it.

Corbo shut the receiver off, and jammed it in his pack. "We better hurry." He helped Livia onto her horse, and returned to his horse.

The two horses ran for the south.

Livia tried to steer them toward the road, at least a little. The horses had already had a long day, and lack of food and water slowed them before long. Once they reached a fast trot, they glanced to the sides if they saw a potential waterhole. None looked deep enough to water them well.

At one tiny pond, the horses turned. Snarling wolves scattered. Two tattered human skeletons were half-immersed in the dark water. One wolf hadn't given up its prize, a half-eaten, thin cow only feet away.

Livia jerked back on the reins and pulled them away. She clutched her stomach to avoid vomiting.

Chapter 24

San Francisco Mountain, Arizona to Camp Navajo

Corbo tried to keep up with Livia's horse. His horse, however, slowed to a trot, with his head drooping, blowing, and slobbering. Corbo almost hollered out to Livia to wait. He'd rather she be safe. As Livia passed almost out of hearing, Corbo's horse went down.

He fell off, and rolled over. They had almost made it to the road. The horse thrashed around, mouth foaming and screeching. Livia was out of sight, not even watching for him. She'd be back when she realized he wasn't beside her. Of that, he was sure.

Corbo moved carefully, and checked for broken bones. Aches and pains shifted as he adjusted on the ground. Scraped and scratched legs for sure, with perhaps invisible damage. He groaned, picked up his bag, and reached in. There was the radio, in pieces. Further down, was the handgun. He grabbed it and pulled it out.

The horse thrashed about, with three legs in the air. Not a good sign.

Corbo crawled close enough to grab the mane. As soon as he held the horse's head, it relaxed a little. It continued to grunt and snort, nostrils flared.

The three legs in the air felt okay to his untrained hands. The fourth hoof was trapped and twisted at an unnatural angle in a prairie dog hole. The horse would never again stand on its own. Corbo tried to soothe the horse by patting its neck.

"Sorry, old boy. Wish I'd gotten to know you better."

Holding the horse's mane, he pointed the gun below the ears. With his eyes closed, he pulled the trigger.

The horse gave one more shudder, and flopped, landing on Corbo's leg. The gun was almost empty. And now, his knee hurt badly. It was dark, and coyotes would be coming soon. It was too dark to walk on the injured knee. He sat his pack down beside the horse's body, which would make as good of a landmark as any nearby.

Horsemeat would be valuable in a land where food was scarce. If he could save it from the coyotes. Coyotes were crafty and dangerous.

He might be able to save it, if Livia came back soon.

Night crept across the land. Desert creatures scuttled as the shadows lengthened.

A sore knee wouldn't let him walk far anyway. Tomorrow would be worse. Stiffness seeped into his knee as darkness fell. If Livia kept riding for help, the vultures, and coyotes howling would bring her back to him and the horse.

Corbo pulled the pack close. The guts of the radio spilled out in his hands. He tried to straighten the wires, and close the case with them inside. It wasn't easy to put it back together. All the parts had fit in there somehow before. As it clapped shut, the ground shuddered beneath him.

The ground twisted, and moved right, left, up, down. He lost all sense of direction and fell over. The shaking continued. After a loud pop, the ground stilled. Corbo sat up.

Ahead of him, the San Francisco Mountain glowed in radiant splendor. Almost like a campfire should appear up close, was glowing from the top. A large steam cloud surrounded the mountain peak.

Corbo didn't know much about this kind of volcano. Or, what kind of danger he was in. According to Alex, volcanic gases could be more deadly than the lava because they spread farther, and faster.

To keep it in view, he spider walked backwards, grabbed his pack, and tried to stand.

Groaning, he fell. There was no way he was going to be able to run to find Livia on a banged up knee. Where was she? She should've been back by now.

Corbo rolled on to his hands and knees, and tried to stand, using the horse's body for support. A low grumbling interrupted the pain signals racing to his brain. Glancing south from the mountain, he saw lights pointed in his direction. He hoped they were headlights of someone from Camp Navajo.

Corbo sat down and gasped for breath. He held his pack, and his handgun, in case it wasn't a rescue. The lights approached. They stopped a few yards away. It was a rather large vehicle.

Livia jumped out, and ran to him. "Are you okay?"

"Not sure. Help me up."

She reached out her hand, and he pulled himself into a standing position. The knee tried to buckle under him. "I think I'll need your crutches."

She laughed. "Sure. We'll find you some of your own soon. I need mine. What happened to the horse?"

Sweat from running, dirt, ash from the volcano, and blood, both from the fall, and the bullet through the brain, covered the animal's carcass. Corbo wished he had known the animal better, and could have saved it. It had saved their lives at least once in such a short time. How would they ever repay Kestrel? "He stepped in a prairie dog hole. His leg is broken. I wish we didn't have to leave him. I'm sure the people at Camp Navajo could use the meat."

Kestrel, now in full military regalia, and another man, stepped out of the elongated pickup truck, and walked up to them. "It's okay. Here lean on us. We will help you to the vehicle."

Corbo didn't cry out as they led him to the vehicle, hopping on one foot. As they opened the door for him, he gazed back at the San Francisco Mountain one last time. Steam rose, and a small reddish glow bubbled at the summit. There appeared to be a small red and yellow stream flowing down the side of the mountain. He slid inside the vehicle.

The men and Livia hurried back to the horse. They pulled it around the truck, and dragged it up into the bed. Livia's horse reared nervously. In moments, they coaxed her up into the truck bed.

Livia slid in beside him. He relaxed a little as she reached her hand out for his arm. "Let's go a little slow, for my horse's sake."

Corbo squeezed her hand. "I wish I could've saved the other one. I'm not sure how we will travel now."

"Do you drive much?" Kestrel asked.

Corbo laughed. "Well, I did. Until the truck ran out of gas. Now my knee will keep me from driving for a bit."

"We can find you another vehicle. Where are you trying to reach?"

"We are trying to reach a place south of Phoenix where my father may be."

The driver had a tough time driving along the broken road. Potholes weren't making it any easier. He focused on the road.

The tiny glowing dot of San Francisco Mountain didn't shrink behind them.

"We have a few errands that need to be run. If you run them with us, perhaps we can work something out."

Corbo groaned. That would mean more time away from finding his father. Without a vehicle, one horse wouldn't be enough. "What kind of errands?"

The driver steered the vehicle. "We'll talk to Dr. Evan and General Nord first. You do know them?"

"Yes," Corbo said. "They might not be happy with me either. No one is these days."

Kestrel leaned between the seats. "Do you intend to eat that horse? Most people wouldn't like that idea."

"I guess they've never really been hungry then. I've ate horse meat when one died of natural causes, or something like this. Why waste the animal? Meat's too valuable. Too many people go hungry."

"You would do well here. We see horses as part of our everyday lives, and can't imagine our lives without them. There isn't much food for them here. We won't let them starve to death, and us to."

Corbo understood.

"What about you, Livia?" Kestrel said.

Livia squeezed Corbo's hand. "Once, I would never have thought of eating horse meat. In the last two months, I've learned what hunger is. Horses are as much a food source as a cow. I'd rather have beef to eat, and keep my horse to ride. Right now I'm so hungry; I think I could eat the horse."

Corbo laughed and hugged Livia.

The gates of Camp Navajo were passed without question, or comment. The driver stopped at a building, and Kestrel helped him out. Corbo leaned on Livia's arm. He had never leaned on her before. His other arm placed most of his weight on her extra crutch because he was afraid of hurting her.

Corbo never saw what happened to the horse.

Livia opened the door to the building, and he hobbled through, gritting his teeth as he lifted the painful leg. Inside, people hurried to help him across to a chair.

"We'll find a doctor." one woman yelled as she grabbed a landline phone.

Corbo sat down. He hoped he hadn't damaged it too bad. This was not the time, or place for crushed bones. People who got hurt these days wouldn't stand a chance. Modern medicine only worked with electricity. Ancient medicine had been forgotten. Except maybe by Kestrel and others who lived on reservations.

He didn't want to think about the pain. The lights flickered. Solar power energy levels could be reduced and keep the bulbs from working at full potential. Motion, and the pain in his knee, were too much. The room swirled.

Corbo woke up stretched out on a cot.

Livia sat beside him, holding his hand. "It's okay." She squeezed his hand and smiled at him.

He groaned and tried to move.

"Don't move now. The sedative they gave you will help. I don't know how much is left."

"Sedative? They have some?"

"A few. Don't worry. They're adjusting crutches for you. That they have." She squeezed his hand.

"How long have I been asleep?"

Livia leaned over and gazed into his eyes. "Maybe an hour. You need more." Her warm breath caressed his eyebrows.

"Okay." His eyes closed. His concerns could wait till morning.

Clump, clump, clump. Heavy boots on the tile floor woke Corbo.

Livia sat beside him, holding his hand.

The door opened without a sound, other than the clump of boots.

A man with a stern expression walked into the room. He reminded Corbo of General Nord. "Are you better?"

"Yes sir." Corbo struggled to sit up. "I need to be better so I can go see my father. I have to find him."

The man walked over to the bed and held out his hand. "You're not going anywhere in your condition, on your own, anytime soon."

Corbo shook his hand. "Sir, tell me who you are?"

The man grabbed a chair, and pulled it over to the bed. "I'm usually called Corporal Eagle Eye." He sat down and looked at them both with a twinkle in his eye. "Please, tell your story."

Corbo began the story. After a while, his mouth became dry.

Livia handed him a glass of water and took over for a bit.

"And so we ended up here," Corbo said at last.

Corporal Eagle Eye had clasped his hands around his knees and bent forward to listen. Now, he leaned back and smiled. "So, you ran away from your friends." He looked them both full in the eye. "And now, you need new friends. Well, let's see what we can do."

He clasped his hands and faced the ceiling. "Dr. Evan wants you to check out the Lake Mary faults."

Corbo groaned. "We've no idea what to look for, or how to make sense of it. Amber and Alex can recognize lines and dirt colors. There was something about the movement of rocks. I don't remember what, or know how to read it. I did the grunt work for Dr. Rebecca. I didn't learn enough."

"What about you?" Corporal Eagle Eye turned to Livia.

"I don't know a thing about fault lines. I didn't learn from Amber," she stammered. "I wish I had. I might have, if I hadn't hurt my ankle. Then, I had other things on my mind."

"So going back north to the faults won't help you, or us. General Nord wants you to do something else as well. I guess you know about the nuclear power plant?"

His hope of finding his father slipped away. He definitely didn't want to go there. And Livia should not be allowed there either. "You can't go there. No way."

She squeezed his hand. "I'll go wherever you go."

"Perhaps I can send you on a different mission?" Corporal Eagle Eye said to Livia.

"What would that be?" Livia said.

"Let's see." Corporal Eagle Eye twiddled his thumbs. "There isn't much pain medicine, and there are three missions you are needed on. Plus, your own."

He looked directly at Corbo. "They are all intertwined. You can have the pain medicine, crutches, and a vehicle. If, and only if."

Corbo groaned as he shifted on the too small cot in the darkened room.

"Three vehicles will go out. One, with both of you, Kestrel, and equipment. Corbo will check out the nuclear power plant, while Livia visits Heritage Park, and Out of Africa."

He waited a moment for that to sink in. "You'll know what's best for the animals. We have to be sure they've food and water, are set free, or destroyed if too dangerous," Corporal Eagle Eye said to Livia.

"I, I can do that," Livia said.

"I need you to be sure the nuclear power plant is completely shut down. We can't risk anything. Understood?" He waited on Corbo's answer.

"Yes sir," Corbo said.

Corporal Eagle Eye stood up. "If this part of the plan goes well, one truck will go off to do Dr. Evan's work. While you and your truck will go to find your father." He walked to the door, glanced back.

"Good luck. If you decide to do as I suggest; you may leave in the morning."

Corbo held Livia's hand. They didn't have much choice. They were in this together. At least she would be a little bit safer while he was at the nuclear power plant. He rested his head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

"Livia, you need some sleep too. " His hand slipped out of hers.

Bumping and banging almost roused him, as someone brought another cot for her to sleep on. He drifted off to sleep. She would be close beside him. He could rest.

Chapter 25

Fort Sill, Meers Fault, Oklahoma

Amber dozed off. Every time they hit a bump, she nodded awake. Vague images drifted out of reach, Who, or what they were, she wasn't sure.

The vehicle stopped at the looming gates of Fort Sill.

Another gloomy, rule driven base.

They were allowed through without difficulty. At least the guards didn't ask for identification. She wasn't sure where hers was, it may have been lost in all the turmoil. Tam and Joe didn't have any at all, or at least she had forgotten to ask.

She hugged the sleeping children closer to her, waking them into a drowsy state of semi-consciousness. They grumbled as they adjusted, drifting back to sleep.

Soon, the truck rolled to a stop in front of a long building. She tenderly shook the children until they woke.

Alex helped Joe out of the vehicle. The boy stumbled on something in the dark and fell into Alex's arms. Alex lifted him on his hip, and stepped out of the way.

Amber stepped out and helped Tam down.

She leaned up against Amber as they followed Corporal Puma into the building.

"I'll show you the sleeping quarters. We are all bunked together right now. Sorry." He rushed down the candle-lined hallway.

Amber hurried after Corporal Puma. Tam's sleep sweaty hand almost slipped from her grasp. Candle light flickered, and a few blew out as they raced past.

He stopped at a door, and held his hand out. "Here you go. Best we can do. There are sleeping bags inside the door."

Tam held Amber's hand, and gazed up at her face. Her breath came in tiny gasps.

Alex, carrying Joe, stopped beside them.

Various snores resonated from deep within the room.

"I'll be back in a few hours for you. Try to rest now." He sprinted down the hall.

Amber glanced at Alex. "Well I guess we have to find somewhere to sleep in the dark."

They walked in. Candle light from the hallway showed them a little path to where two empty cots rested side by side. Amber reached the first empty one, and sat her pack down. "Let's put Tam and Joe on the sleeping bags, with their quilt over them, and between us," she whispered.

They set up the sleeping bags, with the quilt cover, and within moments, Tam and Joe snuggled in.

"I need to go find a restroom," Amber whispered. "I'll be right back."

Out in the hallway she glanced up and down. To her right were the restrooms and coffee area. To the left was the long hallway of closed doors. Thankful to know where both were located, she hurried back to bring Tam, so she wouldn't wake up disoriented in the middle of the night.

As tired as she was, Amber had difficulty drifting into deep sleep. Corbo and Livia were somewhere out there, if they had survived. Her hand squeezed her now useless phone. No more chats or texts with Karen. Her charge cord had long been lost. Tom would watch after Karen. Dr. Rebecca was back east on a project. If they were all safe and alive, she hoped to see them again.

She fell into an uneasy sleep full of vivid dreams of her mom, Brandon, Karen, and Dr. Rebecca all back home in California. It was home, though nothing appeared in its normal place. The dream bounced to Corbo and Livia searching for Dr. Evan, because he knew something important. She drifted along, trying to unravel the tangled threads for a clue as to what the dream meant.

As she glimpsed the clue, her body shook uncontrollably. At first, she thought she was in another earthquake. Then, she realized Corporal Puma was shaking her shoulder. "Come on, wake up. Sorry to be so quiet. People are sleeping in shifts right now."

Amber rolled over, trying to stay on the narrow cot.

Tam stretched out in the sleeping bag beside her, eyes blinking.

"Have some coffee. Meet me in the lounge beside the coffee maker in twenty minutes." Corporal Puma hurried away to shake someone else awake.

Amber reached down to wake Tam. "Come on, we'll take our bags and go change. Wake your brother. It's time to go."

Tam sleepily rolled over and patted her brother's hand.

She would be a good big sister.

Amber sat up and pulled her pack together. She reached over to Alex. "Come on Alex, we have to go. I'm afraid it's going to be another long day."

He groaned, and rolled over. "What hit me yesterday?"

She laughed quietly. "You don't remember? Don't worry. You will." A quick kiss on the cheek ought to wake him.

He sat up, and rubbed his head. "Oh yeah. Long day yesterday."

They gathered the packs, quilt, and sleeping bags. Alex dropped them off in the tiny, dark conference room beside the coffee area.

Amber took a candle into the restroom to change clothes. She had to be careful, as she had never used candles as a primary light source before. Flapping clothes near a candle could spell disaster. Starting a fire wasn't the way to begin the day. Back in Elmore City, they waited till the sun came up, and changed in rooms with light sheets over the windows instead.

"Tam, you change first."

Amber held the door closed, and watched the candle flicker. Avoiding sudden movement, she sat the candle down and changed while Tam waited on her.

Coffee hadn't appealed to her until recently. As she blew to cool it, she wondered how long they would have coffee, or hot chocolate for Tam and Joe, before the supplies ran out. Could coffee and cocoa grow here? She didn't want to drink it often, if it wouldn't be available much longer.

Alex held his cup at waist level, and watched her. His smile sent shivers up and down her spine.

Disoriented from lack of sleep, Tam and Joe yawned and stretched.

Amber sent them into the meeting room, and let them snuggle up in a corner with one of the sleeping bags and their quilt. Soon they were fast asleep with their cups of hot chocolate beside them.

Amber and Alex sat at the bare wooden table and waited. The candle cast eerie shadows along the room as the flames flickered. Partial faces visible for seconds. As the candles burned down, and out, what would long dark buildings without windows do for light and temperature control? She was too tired to talk, and had no idea

what she wanted to do next. Other than find a safe place for Tam and Joe.

The door squeaked open.

Joe screamed.

Tam yawned and rolled over, patting her brother's back.

"Oops. Sorry." Corporal Puma pushed the door part way closed. "Didn't think they'd be asleep. Kids are usually wide-awake."

"Yesterday was a long day for them," Amber said. "A painful day."

Colonel Puma sat down at the table. "Wanna tell me about it?"

Amber glanced over at Alex. "Well, they know. I'm not sure when, or if, their mother died. Their father died, maybe twenty-four hours before we found them. Their grandmother was dying, and we don't think she made it through the evening. She begged us to take them with her last breath."

Corporal Puma held his hands out to Amber. "I'm so sorry. Is there anything we can do?"

Tears rolled down Amber's cheeks. "I want to find them a safe home. A safe place from all of this disaster." Her arms lifted in a helpless gesture.

"We will," he said. "Now Alex, what do you want?"

Alex patted Amber on the shoulder. "I want Amber happy, and with me if possible."

Corporal Puma said. "I wish it was that easy. First, I have someone to take care of the children."

The children tugged at her heart. She didn't really want to leave them behind.

"I need you to explore the Meers fault, and report back within twenty-four hours."

Another fault. Her dream job, she no longer wanted to do. It changed too fast now. The children would feel abandoned again.

Corporal Puma leaned back. "Alex, I am sending you to check on the formerly dormant volcanic region within the Wichita Mountains. It's going to be a dangerous journey. I'm afraid your journey may take two days."

Amber grabbed hold of Alex's hand. She didn't want to let it go. Too many people had already died, and many more were missing. If he were lost, or killed, she would be alone. Her mom, Brandon, and Karen, all gone too far away for her to visit or talk to again. Alex

was her only connection to her past, even if she wanted to push him away as much as she wanted to pull him close.

Tam and Joe might want to find a real family, even if Tam had said the day before she wanted to stay with Amber. She laid her head on Alex's shoulder. "Is there is no other way?"

"Not in the amount of time we have. Trina will stay here with the children. Your teams will come find you in about half an hour. Be awake and ready to go." A tear trickled from the corner of his eye.

As soon as he was gone, Tam jumped up, and stumbled crying into her arms. "Be sure and come back for me."

Amber tried her best to wipe away the tears. She could make no promise to the child. After all, the faults were as likely to split with her next to them, as at a distance. She patted the child's head, and whispered soothing words. Soon, she led her back to the sleeping bag.

"You have to be brave for your brother, and explain." Amber whispered as she rubbed Tam's head, and closed her eyes. "Sleep now. We'll do our best."

Amber glanced back, and realized Alex watched her.

She finished her coffee, and grabbed her pack. "Let's step outside in the hallway, and let Tam and Joe sleep."

In a few moments, a well-dressed woman walked up to them. "I'm Trina. I'm supposed to watch Tam and Joe."

Her confident voice was crisp with a hint of fun hidden underneath. Trina would take good care of the children. "I think they're asleep. Be careful with their grandmother's quilt. It's all they have."

"I'll be sure and take good care of it, and them. There is plenty of food, and games to play. There are a few other children staying here as well. We are letting them all play together, and visit, as long as they get along. My own three are a few years older than Tam and Joe," Trina said.

Amber tried to smile as she glanced back at the children. Their eyes were closed as they burrowed under the quilt. Of course, they could be pretending to sleep because they knew she was leaving.

Trina reached out her hand. "Your teams will be here soon. If the children sleep much longer, they may miss morning outside play. Inside, there'll be able to play in one of the old re-purposed training rooms. Most of the children enjoy that. You never know

what they might find in there. Don't worry it's child proof. Be safe, and careful out there." She walked into the room.

Amber rested her head on Alex's shoulder. "I'll miss you Alex. Be careful today and tomorrow. Come back soon."

Two people in military uniform came down the hallway. "Amber, you'll come with us to the Meers formation. You know what you're looking for?"

She hugged Alex one last time, and kissed his ear. Amber picked up her pack and walked up to the man and woman. "What are your names?"

"You may call us Rinny and Jen. Let's hurry. We have a long ways to go to be back by nightfall," Jen said.

They hurried down the long empty candlelit hall. Their feet echoed through the halls. There were supposed to be hundreds of people here, none were visible, or making a sound. Maybe they were all in meeting rooms, or out on the base lands.

She followed Rinny and Jen out the door. Several vehicles were parked under the overhang.

Rinny unplugged one from a solar power generator, and Jen showed Amber where to place her pack. Similar to one she had ridden a year ago. It wasn't much more than a large four-wheeler. A lightweight enclosed area, big enough for four people, or three people and packs. Several packs were already stashed in one empty seat.

"We have a little power. Not enough to run the whole building, especially at night," Rinny said.

"Before the quakes, we used to go out to the Meers fault region and explore it," Jen said. "We will know where the changes are, and you can tell us what they mean."

Amber strapped herself in. "That's good, because I've never been there before."

Rinny drove over the rocky terrain for what seemed like hours.

Amber was jounced around far more than she ever had been on Fortune's back. They drove past a small lake, then a larger lake, and wrapped around it. Before long, they drove into the opening of a deep ravine. It was an open topped tunnel as far as the eye could see. There was a zigzag pattern to it with fresh open scars.

Rinny stopped the vehicle, and they got out.

Something large and metal sprawled across the ground.

"What is it?"

Rinny and Jen whistled at the devastation in the ravine.

"I can't believe the windmills fell," Jen said. "They said it couldn't happen. No earthquake would be that strong. This is where much of the local power came from."

"What a fault line," Amber said. "I've never seen one so deep, or so long. It's deeper than most houses are tall."

Rinny backed up to the vehicle. "That's why they put the windmills here. The wind whistled through the canyon. It was a great power source. We wondered why the wind run generator stopped. We better get out of here."

Amber had a fleeting thought of Tam and Joe. This was her job. The corporal expected her to view more of the damage. "We have to go further. How long is this ravine?"

"It's miles," said Jen. "I wouldn't want to be down here if another quake struck."

"Neither do I," Amber said. "We have to see further down the ravine. Either view it from inside the ravine, or on top. If an earthquake hits while we are on top, it could be as deadly as being at the bottom." Amber's hands trembled. The consequences of a quake could be as deadly as not finding the answers to report back to Corporal Puma.

Rinny walked back to the vehicle. "Come on then, let's hurry. The sooner we leave, the quicker we can be back. What do we need to be on the lookout for?" He asked as he turned the key in the ignition.

"Jen, pay attention to any odors. If you smell the least bit of sulfur, let me know immediately," Amber said. "Rinny be careful. I may have to ask you to stop for a second, so I can check a few of the formations. Anything that has changed, please mention. Try to it point out, so I can check it out. We don't have much time."

Rinny drove about fifteen miles per hour through the ravine. Rocks and boulders were strewn across the ground. Some had been on the ground for decades, centuries, or millennia. Others, only a few weeks. From time to time, the motion of the vehicle bouncing along caused Amber to wonder if the ground was shifting under them. She couldn't be sure if it was the vehicle, the momentum, or tiny earthquakes.

In several places, she got out to view where the ground had recently faulted. New hairline fractures that weren't on any known map. Previously, this would be a great cause for celebration, to find a new fault, or an undocumented branch off an old one. Instead, it increased her fear, and that of the two people with her.

Rinny stopped. "I don't dare go any further. I've lost count of how many fallen windmills we've passed."

Amber glanced around. "At this stage, it wouldn't matter. We know there's been massive movement here. No sign of fumaroles. It's too dangerous to stay any longer."

Rinny floored it as fast as he dared, back out toward the open mouth of the ravine.

At the mouth, they heard a massive crash. One more distant windmill must've fallen.

The ground began to shake.

He pushed it a little further before he stopped.

They took the time for one last glance back at the ravine. Scrub brush slid down the southern side. More boulders fell as the fault slipped, barely beyond their tracks.

Amber closed her eyes. Safe for the moment. Her arms and legs shook, from more than the quake.

Rinny drove until they reached the large lake. They stopped near the edge. Shorelines tilted at an odd angle. Waves didn't reach the shoreline closest to them. Another symptom of the quake.

Jen groaned. "I'm afraid our fears have been well founded. The lakes may have breached. We may have trouble getting back to base."

"Doesn't matter. We have to eat now. Or we won't have the energy to make it back. Amber, hand me my pack, please," Rinny said.

Amber reached for his pack. At least she hoped it was his. She was too busy examining the land in front of her. Even though she didn't know it well, and they had drove fast by it before, she could see some changes. Rocks had shifted, areas had uplifted, while others had lowered in a short span of time.

"Everything's so different. It's not worth checking anymore. We almost need to wait until Mother Nature decides to calm down. I wanna hurry back to Tam and Joe." Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Two more minutes." Rinny gulped a sandwich. Soon, he turned the ignition back on, and they began the trek back to base.

Chapter 26

Fort Sill to Wichita Mountains, Kiowa Lake, and Deer Creek, Oklahoma

Alex watched Amber leave with growing concern. She could be in great danger, and he wouldn't be there to protect her. They both had a job to do, and he knew that. His life had changed more than he ever expected. Three months ago, this would've been the greatest opportunity he could ever have. A chance to walk on a live volcano, other than the ones he had grown up on. Now he was afraid, for Amber, and himself as well.

He glanced back in the room. Trina sat and read by candlelight, waiting on Tam and Joe to wake up. It wasn't only for him that he wanted Amber and himself to survive. It was for these two as well. Tam and Joe had only known them for a day. Their attachment though fast, was a bond he didn't want to break. An unspoken promise with them, and with Amber.

Footsteps pounded down the hall. Corporal Puma walked around a distant corner with two young men beside him. He hurried up to Alex. "Sorry, these are all I can find. Call them by their nicknames Jax and Trax. They've at least been to the range you're going to. Good day." His feet clumped together, before he scurried off down the hallway.

Alex tried to grin at the two young men. "I guess you haven't been here long."

One stepped forward, and held out his hand. "I'm Jax. No, we shouldn't be doing this. We didn't quite complete basic training. That's why we don't have a title or any other job right now. I'm not sure if basic training is going to exist anymore, so we can't try again."

"Perhaps not like it was." Alex said. "I guess we better go. It could be a long day and night." He picked up his pack and followed the two silent young men.

It would be lonely without Amber. Thinking about her hair, her eyes, and her laughter caused an ache deep in his chest. Fighting

for breath, he struggled to keep up. If it was going to be like this, he couldn't think about her while he was doing his job.

They went out a side door, and Jax unplugged a vehicle. "Your friend is checking the area the wind power comes from for nights. It doesn't work anymore. Solar power for daytime energy. No other backup power."

Alex climbed in. The bent and rusty roll cage wasn't much protection against flying rocks, or if the vehicle rolled over. It was better than no protection.

"It'll be a long drive up Deer Creek. We've been checking out the local hotspots the last few weeks. This one needs an expert opinion." Jax backed the vehicle up, and they were on their way.

"What is the name of the formerly extinct volcano in question?" Alex rattled around, strapped in between packs.

"We don't know. We can't find a name on any map. I'm sure someone, somewhere, knows the name," Trax said.

Jax didn't follow the road. He followed a general northwest direction, slowing to point out fumaroles in the distance. They were everywhere on this once volcanic plain. Steam spiraled from recent eruptions. Others show no signs of current activity, from this distance. Alex couldn't tell for sure.

At one point, he asked Jax to stop. "What about that one?"

Jax stopped the vehicle a few hundred yards away from the cinder cone.

"That one was definitely letting off steam a few months ago, during the biggest plate shift. It's too bad I didn't have a working camera that day. My batteries had already died."

"Are there many more like that?"

"Sure, a few. We are about to cross the road. Then it's more open, and there are more large volcanoes further separated, different from the cinder cones here."

"Okay, we better go on then." More volcanoes didn't sound as exciting as it would have a few months before.

It wasn't long before Jax had to stop and check both sides of a crossroad. "We don't see many vehicles anymore. Nobody has power. Alternate fuels are being used for heating at night, and cooking meals. We check the road anyway. You never know when a herd of animals might come running by."

Trax laughed. "A rancher herded his cows down this road a few days ago to the base for our food."

They reached an area where there was more grass, with scrub brush trees growing in the distance. Hills and mountains crept closer as the vehicle floundered through the scattered terrain. In the distant past, these mountains had all been over a hotspot.

Trax told the story of the region as they road. He pointed out landmarks and signs in boulders almost as well as Amber could. Once, Oklahoma had tried to split, and this was the place. Or, at least a part of it. The split area covered the whole Wichita Mountain range. It was a nasty scar that had not healed. And now, it might be reopening.

Amber would be fascinated by the fault lines she was going to see, if she wasn't afraid of them. The Meers fault was unique for being so long in the middle of the continent. The New Madrid, as well as the Rio faults were similar in position, and length, of shifting internal plate boundaries.

In some ways, the skin of the earth was like the skin on your hands; little lines going every which way, and not always visible. The things that you do each day could affect those lines on your hands. A cut could change their shape and positioning, much as a cut on the Earth's surface would change the shape and function of the fault lines, even causing others to rip wide open.

A volcanic eruption could increase or decrease the pressure on the local fault lines, pushing them in different directions, causing earthquakes that otherwise might not have occurred. Or at least not occurred at the moment.

They passed small ponds and lakes as fast as Jax dared drive. Some of the gushing streams were new, or perhaps truly ancient, and had been dry streambeds for many generations. Nearing midday, they reached one small pond at the base of the mountain.

"That's it," Jax said. "We'll eat and then hike up the mountain. It's nearly seventeen hundred feet above sea level."

Alex pulled his pack from on top of the others, and stepped out of the vehicle. He walked over near the small pond, and sat down. Opening the pack, he pulled out his last gas meter. At least it was portable, even if it wasn't a full range COSPEC. It would measure the most important gases.

He reached further in his pack for the radio Corporal Puma had handed him hours before. He turned on the radio, and searched for the signal. Corporal Puma, or his designated assistant, would be listening.

The meter beeped and buzzed. Several gasses were higher than he would expect to be normal. Nothing outside of safe range; which was good in this valley between the mountains. He gave his report, with the meter beside him.

"Keep up the good work," babbled through the static.

His sandwich tasted like cardboard and paste. He closed his eyes as he ate. Amber's smile could light up his day. He missed her so much.

Laughter brought him out of his thoughts. He grinned as he realized he was hugging his sandwich. At least what remained of it. Half the sandwich had fallen on the ground to be attacked by ants. He moved back and let them eat.

Jax and Trax laughed as they finished drinking from a shared water bottle.

"Must be someone special," Jax said.

Alex gulped the rest of his sandwich.

"A person whose sunshine brightens the day is always a good thing. Keep your mind on the hike. Are you ready?" Trax closed the water and grabbed his pack.

"Almost." Alex closed his pack with the radio inside, and kept the meter in his hand.

About halfway up the formerly dormant volcano, they felt a few rumbles. The ground under their feet shifted. Alex steadied himself and glanced up. Fresh steam erupted from the top. He held his meter up. Gases were up even more. Not deadly yet. Not safe either. He was glad Amber was elsewhere.

They stumbled on to the top. He climbed up between Jax and Trax. In front of his feet was a glowing volcanic vent. The plug pulsated in active magma. Steam poured out around it.

The gas meter in his hand beeped. Alex didn't take the time to read it. It would record what it measured. He took a deep breath, ran forward as close as he dared, let it measure, and ran back.

"Come on. We have to go."

Jax and Trax stood rooted to the spot, staring at the scene.

Alex grabbed their shoulders, dragging them from the vent's trance.

They stumbled down the slope, as the ground beneath them changed shape.

Boulders crashed, narrowly missing them, and their vehicle below.

The vehicle had been shifted closer to the pond.

They gasped for breath as they reached their picnic spot.

Alex gazed at the changes occurring on the unnamed volcanic mountain. The hot spot had been punctured. Like an angry pimple, magma rose, pulsed, and oozed out. Lava could wash them away, as water washes microbes off your skin.

Within minutes, Jax slammed the vehicle into gear, and raced as fast as he dared back toward Fort Sill.

Alex struggled to pull out the radio, and call Corporal Puma.

The vehicle bounced across ditches and boulders.

He struggled to hold on, and shout into the microphone.

"The gases, here they are." The gas meter flew across the vehicle, almost out the cage, and dropped down to the floor. "I'll share them later. Fell to the floor. Volcano about to erupt. Coming in."

The static crackled off.

A strange silence occurred.

The vehicle stopped as it was about to cross Deer Creek.

The hint of sulfur drifted down the creek.

"Floor it." Alex shouted. "Or we're dead."

The vehicle jerked across the stream.

Alex held on as tight as he could. He wasn't sure if all the blurry activity he saw was his head jerking from the turbulence, or the earth moving.

Within moments, Jax had to slow a little bit. "Water."

Alex searched in a bag for a water bottle, and handed it up to Trax to give to Jax. In that moment's rest, a boulder slid off a nearby hill, and dammed the stream they were riding beside.

"Mother Nature is as angry as the raiders."

"You bet. It's been a chore to try to keep them from hurting people. We've sent the soldiers everywhere we can." Trax held the bottle to Jax's lips. "One for me too, if you can."

Alex felt around in the bag. The ground shifted as he pulled it out, and it rolled under the seat. He reached under the seat and managed to grab both it, and the gas meter, which still beeped wildly.

He handed the water bottle to Trax and took the empty one, as Jax turned the vehicle, pale-faced.

"Afraid we won't make it," Jax said.

"Why?" Alex asked as he fiddled with the buttons on the gas meter.

"These vehicles aren't meant for fast travel without more backup power. We don't have any. We are going to have to slow down, or walk all the way back."

Alex groaned. "I'll call Corporal Puma."

"Don't bother," Trax said between sips. "He'll be frantic with base reports. You got one report in. Listen, in case he calls for you."

"He has no one to send for us, anyway." Jax steered the vehicle as best he could through the shaking rocky terrain.

Chapter 27

Sedona, Arizona to Wilson Mountain Arizona

Livia had always felt confident walking, or even running, into danger. It was a strange sensation. Rather than going forward, she wanted to run away screaming, dragging Corbo with her to some safe place. Preferably, not back through some long forgotten volcanic plan; or earthquake fault line that had reawakened.

Part of her mind begged to go to Out of Africa. The rest of her worried it wasn't safe. The possibility of hungry animals was one danger, there were others as well. Something deeper perhaps. This pregnancy had changed her. She wished she could call her mom, something she never thought she would want to do.

The road was bumpy in places, with potholes, twists, and pavement breaks. Several times, they had to stop and let the drivers out to verify it was safe to go on. In a few spots, they pulled off the buckled road, and drove on the desert plain past the hazardous crumpled pavement.

Empty desert crept by the window. Livia searched for, and dreaded, steamy vents signaling a new volcanic eruption. The road wrapped around the base of an enormously spread out mountain. She reached for her pack, to find her map and see if the mountain was labeled there.

A wisp of something made her glance back up, out the window. She couldn't decide if it was steam, or maybe a bird soaring high in the cloudless sky. It could be rising water vapor shimmering off the desert sands. A second glance showed something was there, far in the distance, almost out of sight.

"Everyone ready." Kestrel shouted. "No telling if the people living in Sedona are still there. We lost contact almost a month ago. The few people left were scared of raiders they had seen, and gunshots they had heard."

"Or, if any of the original inhabitants are even alive here." The guard beside him whispered.

The vehicle slowed as they entered the town. Parking lots and buildings sat empty. Dust devils played leisurely where customers once parked and shopped. Cats and dogs ran as the vehicles

passed by. Weeds grew in the sand and dirt that crept across the asphalt islands. Empty of people, the lots were full of abandoned vehicles sitting at odd angles, tires missing, gas tank doors opened to the elements.

They reached the end of the first section and veered west along the abandoned road. To the north, brush and sand stretched as far as she could see. Wind blew it across the road, making it difficult to determine where the lane was at times. To the south, an abandoned housing subdivision sprawled, with no sign of people.

Moments later, they had entered another section of businesses over run with the recent sandstorms. Store doors shut against the sand beating on them, trying to break in. Sand always snuck in through invisible cracks. The floors and shelves would need major cleaning, if the stores ever re-opened.

"Once we are outside of town, we will stop for lunch. There used to be a diner there. Wonder if it's still open?" The driver said.

Chapter 28

Sedona, Arizona, Last Ditch Diner and Village of Oak Creek, Arizona

Corbo's muscles ached as he tensed in a protective stance. Corporal Eagle Eye had given him another gun, and more bullets, in case they ran into trouble with raiders in the city. Hopefully, he wouldn't need them. They crept by each building, watching for danger. Shadows flitted in the shade. They could be animals, tiny high clouds, or even a trick of the sunlight through the glass. Caution was advised.

They reached the last building of the business district. Endless desert greeted them.

"The Last Ditch Diner is less than a mile away," Kestrel said. "I used to come here and explore the ditch, along with a few scientists. They dug and talked about fossils, and used lots of other sciencey terms. What do you think they would see now?"

Corbo grunted and relaxed. "No idea. I wouldn't know what the differences are."

The restaurant was between two sections of highway. Kestrel drove into a median parking lot. Sand and dust devils wrecked their havoc in the heat of the day.

"Doesn't look good," Corbo said.

"No. Better be prepared. Livia, you stay behind." Kestrel glanced back at her.

"No way. I'm not staying. You wouldn't know spoiled food if you saw it. I would. I need to go in too." Livia had already opened her door. "Watch out for snakes and rats inside."

Corbo shivered at the thought. Perhaps she was right. After all, she had helped her parents run a deli for as long as she could remember. "Stay close to me." He caught up to her.

Livia reached the door. She gave it a slight jiggle. "It's open. I'll brush the sand away."

She used her foot to move enough sand to open the door enough to step through. It stayed open, caught in the sand drift. She sniffed through the door. "Stuffy, possibly mold and yeast

growing. Lots of rats. Don't touch them or their droppings. It'll be dark. They probably don't have power for the lights."

Livia followed the beam of sunlight peeking into the stuffy storefront. She checked, and then picked up, a broom by the door.

"No spiders on it. It may scare a snake or a rat away."

She walked down the main row of tables. They were covered in spider webs full of decayed bugs, dust, grit, and rat droppings.

Scurrying feet scattered around the room.

Rat tracks crisscrossed on the dusty floor. Snake trails wove through tracks. Droppings littered the floor under tables. A rabbit bounded off a chair.

The swinging door to the food prep area hung on broken rusty hinges. Its lower edge stuck in a pile of dust on the floor.

Livia slid it out of the way, and walked through.

Corbo followed. Rat tracks and spider webs had taken over. No sign of people recently. Food had to be available, somewhere here. Several cabinets with thick metal doors hid under the back counter. His hand reached for one.

"Don't open it!" Livia shouted.

"It's a food cabinet," Corbo said. "It's thick to keep the rats out."

He bent down and opened the door.

Corbo gasped as he jerked back. The putrid odor was sickening. Rats scurried out the front door.

Livia grabbed his hand, covered her mouth with the other, and dragged him out of the building. They coughed and choked on the rancid musky combination of rat fear urine, and rotten food.

They collapsed on the ground, in the shade of the vehicles. Gasping for breath, the heat of the sand seeped through their clothes.

"What did you see?" Kestrel asked.

"Nothing." Corbo heaved, and hoped to forget the stench soon. "Close door."

One of the soldiers walked up to the restaurant. "Yuck, how did you ever go in there?"

"Corbo opened a refrigerator cabinet door after we went in." Livia sat up. "He didn't listen. I don't think there is any safe food in there. Unless, you like E-Coli and botulism. I didn't see any canned or boxed foods."

"Nope." The driver said. "Everything was trucked in, and handmade. Guess we better eat here then. The drive through the Village of Oak Creek may be more desperate."

Corbo ate his sandwich, and tried not to look at Livia. After all, if he had listened to her, they could have eaten inside on the tables, even if it was stuffy. After eating, he went around the shady side of the building. They might not have another break for a while.

A rattle disturbed his concentration. In a tiny line of shade, a rattlesnake coiled with a large rat half in its mouth. It slithered under the building's foundation, a few feet away from his feet.

Rattlesnakes wouldn't naturally be out in the heat of the day. It must have been in, or under, the building and trying to escape the noxious odors when it caught a meal.

Corbo backed up, and hurried back to the vehicles.

He took Livia's hand. "I'm sorry. If we could have eaten inside, we could have sat on chairs instead of the warm ground."

Livia laughed. "No way could we eat in there. All those rats. No telling what diseases they were carrying. The tables were feces covered and deadly." She patted his hand. "It's okay. You may have saved us. Breathing the air from rat droppings can be dangerous when that many have swarmed."

"I didn't see any food for them."

"There are always crumbs we can't see, or notice. Bugs trail in. Mice and rats gnaw in to eat the bugs. Snakes slither in through their holes to devour the mice and rats. All the food is already devoured in there. They'll leave soon," Livia said.

"I saw a rattlesnake too, around the side of the building."

Livia shivered in his arms. "I'm glad we are away from there. It's not a place I want to be. This transition time is scary." She leaned her head on his shoulder.

Corbo patted her hair. It was silky and soft. If there were somewhere safe he could send her. Somewhere far away, where food and sleep were plentiful. Maybe she would be happy again.

"Be ready," Kestrel said. "I'm worried about up here. It's an outpost in between the two towns. Should be totally deserted."

Corbo pulled away from Livia as a tear slipped down her cheek. "It's okay," he whispered. "Maybe it's as asleep as Sedona was."

She rubbed her face, and leaned to the window as Corbo pulled out his gun, in case of danger.

It wasn't long before they spotted trouble.

"Men, ragged and dusty to the south." Corbo lifted the gun off his lap, ready to shove it up to the window.

Kestrel slowed, letting the other two vehicles catch up. "We are doing this because?" Kestrel said.

"Hey, I would never have come this far off my track," Corbo said.

Kestrel steered forward. "I can barely see the road."

"You know where it should be?" Corbo asked.

"Sure."

"Watch for traps," the guard beside him said.

Corbo eyed the men skulking in front of the first house they passed.

"More over here. Fraid we're surrounded." The other soldier said.

Corbo groaned as the vehicle ground to a halt. A quick glance showed the other soldier was right. They couldn't go forward, or backward without running over someone.

"I don't wanna do this," Corbo said.

"Wait a minute." Kestrel rolled down his window. "What can we do for you?"

One snarling male stepped forward. "Give us the vehicles, and go on your merry way." He laughed long and loud.

"Sorry," Kestrel said. "Can't do that. We are on a military mission of peace."

The male took one step closer. "There is no military anymore. We are the rulers here. Give us the vehicles." He motioned to his followers who pulled out guns, and pointed them at the vehicles.

"Do it now, or we shoot."

Kestrel laughed. "Now if you shoot the vehicles, they won't work for you long will they?"

"The vehicles don't matter. It's the food you carry we need." One of the followers shot above the vehicle.

The driver raised his arm enough for Corbo to see.

They would have to fight.

Livia was crouched down, hidden in the seat. If these men saw her, it would be all over for her.

The windows slid down.

Corbo stuck his gun out, pointed right at the leader.

"Pull you followers back," Kestrel said.

The leader let his head lean to one side, glanced at Corbo, and then at the driver. He opened his arms wide. "All I want is peace, and food for my friends. Your friend can't understand you anyway. I'll forgive you if he shoots." The leader lifted his arms in a sweeping motion.

Corbo pulled the trigger, shut his eyes, and dropped to the seat. Screams, shouts, and bullets flew through the air. He heard a pattering sound, and opened his eyes, glancing up.

Kestrel shut the reinforced windows, which had saved their lives. He drove crazily through the followers, trying to avoid hitting one.

"Think you got him," Kestrel said.

"I wasn't watching. I'll never be the same again."

"Nope. One never is. We can't go back through here."

Corbo sat up as Kestrel found the road.

Both vehicles were right behind them. They raced forward, as fast as Kestrel dared go.

"Anyone hurt?" Kestrel asked.

"A bumped nose." Corbo helped Livia sit up. "How will we get back then?"

"They'll expect us to go north. We are going south with you both. We can make roads if we have to."

"What about fuel?"

"We use a combination of solar and other fuel. However, the solar connections can't be too sandy, or they corrode. Then, we need fuel. Hope to find more at Out of Africa."

"Were those people from there?" Livia smoothed her hair.

"Probably not. Good thing you hid. These raiders are everywhere, breaking into homes and businesses. Sadly, I almost hope they meet your old friends, E-Coli and botulism."

Everyone laughed.

Corbo checked his gun, and made sure it was ready if they needed it. He hoped not. There was no telling what they might find at Out of Africa. Fresh, live, previously well-fed meat, trapped in cages, without trucked in specialty foods. A recipe for raiders. If they only knew. If there were this many raiders here, how many might lurk there?

Chapter 29

Fort Sill, to Tuttle Oklahoma

Amber held Tam on one side and Joe on the other. She hadn't let them out of her sight since she returned from the Meers Fault.

Her hands and head had been banged around as they raced back from the quake damaged area. It may have been a magnitude 7, or more. As her head had cleared, she worried about Tam and Joe. She didn't dare not return, when she had promised them she would.

She held on to them as tight as she could now. That memory, or fear that they would be abandoned, brought a tear to her eye. Now, they were riding in a military convey, going to Tuttle, Oklahoma, and beyond.

Tam snuggled up to her, holding Amber's Ring of Fire pillowcase. "Where are we?"

Amber smoothed the pillowcase across her lap. Brandon had always expected her to explain to him how she knew the geologic facts of an area. An aching pain of the memory of those last "teaching" moments in the California fault, only a few months ago. She could explain it to him. Could she explain it to a four-year-old with no science knowledge? "Where we are isn't on this map."

She pointed to the middle of Oklahoma as the vehicle bounced on the rough roads. "We are about here. I need to update my map. Maybe we can soon. If we have a chance to rest."

"Where are we going?" Tam looked up at her.

Amber hugged her close. "We have to check out a few towns. Be sure the people there are safe from the earthquake. Did it scare you?"

Tam nodded and touched the threads on Amber's pillowcase, tracing the lines that were slowly falling out. "Where will the new x's go?"

Amber pointed out a few places. "I think we have a line over here, in Arizona. And, several new ones in New Mexico. The Rio Grande Rift valley is splitting, forcing us northeastward. Not fun while the plates move."

"Plates move?"

Amber laughed. "I keep forgetting; you didn't have geologic scientists around you." She leaned back and closed her eyes. How to explain to a four-year-old, and not be too far off? An idea surfaced. She hugged Tam close. "Plates are like eggshells, you know those?"

Tam smiled.

"Okay, if a shell cracks, what happens?"

"Move apart."

"Good. Let me see the pillow case for a minute."

Amber took the case, smoothed some areas, and bunched up others. She showed Tam how when one not to scale plate moved, it would create mountains and plains where they weren't before.

Joe reached across and pointed at the "mountains" as she showed them what it meant.

Amber didn't know if they would remember it, or if they even understood. The example wasn't even exactly scientifically correct. Not that it could be in a bouncing vehicle. Enough of an explanation to clarify to them now, and teach the finer points later, much later.

Alex laughed. "My dad would be embarrassed. That sounds so simplified."

"They don't know all the terms and facts we do. It's a start. How much did you know at their age?"

"No idea. Shouldn't you wait until they are old enough to understand it all?"

She took his hand and gazed deeply into his eyes. "No. There may not be anyone to explain it to them. They may never have the education we got. When we were their age, earthquakes, and volcanoes were all history. These children. They are their present. They deserve to know the forces that took their family."

"And if we aren't there to better explain it in more depth later, and they remember today's version, it will create a simplified future view of earthquakes and volcanoes. Pele rises again."

Amber laughed. "Guess so. Do you have a better solution?"

"Not at the moment. I'll let you know when I come up with one."

"We will be at Tuttle in a few minutes," Monty, the driver said. "Everyone should be gone, except a small band of Choctaw who gathered to remember the town founders before the massive quake. They decided to stay and guard the town. Though, I'm not sure they could leave."

"Why's that?" Amber asked.

"It was mostly older women and a few children, left behind for a loom festival."

"Oh, neat. Maybe they can fix the pillowcase." Tam shouted.

"We will see," Amber said. "We may be rescuing them, and taking them back with us. Think there's room?"

"No. At the base, sure. They don’t want to go there with the growlies there."

Amber groaned.

Alex laughed. "See what I mean?"

"They're children. Of course they'll say that. She probably already called it that before I told her, didn't you?"

Tam nodded.

They entered the tiny abandoned town. Most of the legal inhabitants were long gone. Those few left were strangers, and had no way home. This would be interesting.

The dusty truck windows didn't give a good impression of the town. There was a chance there might be raiders hiding in town. All Amber could see was dust and dirty doorsteps. The quakes had occurred during the hot summer months. Plate motion combined with abandoned, dusty fields created up drafts of air lifting dirt and sand, and spread it far across the country. She had read about the Dust Bowl, and had never thought she would live to see it recreated.

It was a small town, and in a few minutes, they reached the local elementary school. Several young children ran and shouted among the swings and slides. None sat alone on the sidelines.

Tam and Joe clapped and bounced around in the seat ready to join them. "Can we?" They begged.

"I guess you can go for a few minutes. We will talk to the adults resting in the shade," Amber said.

Tam and Joe jumped out, shouted. They ran for the swings. The other children turned as one, to stare. Tam and Joe joined them. The boys and girls clapped and grabbed their hands. They danced in a circle singing a tune Amber didn't quite recognize, though it reminded her of nights in quaint South American villages when she was only a few years older than Tam.

Amber covered her mouth as she giggled. "Two little blond heads in a raven sea. What a sight."

Alex hugged her as he helped her out. "The exercise will be good for them. At least they're happy." He took her hand, and they walked to the adults resting beside the once school building.

The people, dressed in their native style, worked on small handicrafts, while the children played.

Amber strolled forward, trying to determine who was the leader of this group. She glanced along the line at each of the seven adults. "Hello."

One woman worked a small weaving loom. "Good afternoon."

Connecting with these people would take a little time. Their comfort level was important to maintain. She glanced back at Tam and Joe. They played well with the other children, fully included, and including.

A young child, a few years older than Tam ran up. "Are you here to rescue us?"

The older woman put her hand out on the child's shoulders. "Do you need rescuing?"

"No, just food."

The older woman laughed as the child ran back to play. "They will soon learn as their ancestors did. They will forget all they have never known. It will be like a bad dream."

"You want to stay here?" Amber shuffled her toes in the sand. They had so much here, and the evacuation camps were in danger too.

"For now. The future is in the past. The past will bring us to the future, and lead us back to our once fertile land."

Alex sat down in front of the woman. "You think the future is here."

"There is food. There is shelter. The children will learn to make their own. Our skills will be highly valued. Being able to create clothing, shelter, and food utensils are the basic building blocks of human life. We know them. Many do not."

Alex shifted to sit more like the woman beside him. "Most people buy them."

One of the elders said, "Where is your money now? With no electricity, you have no money. Paper money has been rare for a long time. And without people to make the basic building blocks of life, or transportation to bring them to you, how would you buy them?"

The elder was right. Without electricity, plastic couldn't be accepted, and there wasn't enough printed paper money to meet the demands anymore.

These people could take care of themselves. They would raise these children well. Prosperity, of a more valuable type, would return to a people who had known suffering for generations. Many people a few years ago, even a few months ago, would consider life like this, with everything they needed, the ability to fend for themselves, and nothing extra, pure poverty.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Amber asked.

"I think you have a question to ask, and that's not it."

Amber stepped back. Could this woman read what was deep in her heart? "I know I should ask if I can leave Tam and Joe here with you." She glanced out at the children playing. The children had gathered together, and were now playing tag, even if it was little different than the way she remembered.

"I don't think I can. I don't know if it's best to leave them, or take them with me. I know I'm young. I don't want to abandon them. That last quake scared them, and me."

"You are wise. Perhaps, your children will help you. Care for them, and they will care for you."

Amber sat down in front of the woman and held out her hands. "Are you sure you don't need anything. There are no young adults here to help you."

"Yes, physical strength. The children have that. By the time we need more, they will have grown and we will be gone. They will never know anger, or abuse by others. They will have no bad habits ingrained upon them by suffering adults."

The woman picked up a piece of woven material. It was a little larger than a placemat. "Here, take this with you. Let it be a reminder of what we're trying to build."

Amber accepted the gift. "We will go then, if you don't need anything. Take care."

"And if the power comes back on?" Alex said.

The second elder responded, "Then we will go back to the way it has been for over a hundred years."

She rubbed her moist eyes. Tam and Joe deserved children to play with. Maybe she and Alex should stay here with them. Dena expected her back in Elmore City after their mission was complete. Tam and Joe could play with Danny and the other children there.

She hoped these people would never have to go back to the way they had lived for the last one to two hundred years. No one

should have to feel that the skills of thousands of years had no meaning. Their values should be elevated to the high standards they deserved, rather than downtrodden.

Amber held up the gift the woman had given her. The colors of red and yellow had meaning to these people. There were even a few strings of brown.

"Can you explain the meaning of the color choice to me?"

"The meaning of the gift from me is a personal one. To you, it has a similar importance, though you do not know it. Share your understanding with your children. It will evolve as all cultures do," the woman said.

"What if we want two cultures to evolve together? Won't they need to, to survive in the future?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps a few cultures will come together in another generation or two, and combine sharing their ways, with none becoming dominant. They will work together. Now go. We will teach our children to make the patterns, the clothes, the ropes, and to work with clay as their ancestors did."

"I think we need to learn it too," Amber said.

The woman smiled. "You may come and bring children next spring if you can. Learning the skills you need for the future."

"Thank you." Amber didn't have a gift to give this woman. Though no material gift could be as valuable as the one given. The greatest gift she could give was to raise Tam and Joe to be self-sufficient, and able to support the community using the skills that had been reviled for generations.

Tam and Joe gently pushed two girls the same age on the swing set while a group of boys ran around the playground equipment. Something those children's children would never know, as the equipment would rust away in a generation. "Tam, Joe, come along. It's time to go."

The children flew toward her, flushed, and full of energy.

She helped them into the vehicle. The other two vehicles prepared to go as well. They hadn't needed the extra soldiers here. They would, at the next place they expected to find people, El Reno.

Chapter 30

Union City, El Reno, Okarche, Oklahoma

Alex handed Tam and Joe salted peanuts to eat as they settled into the uncomfortable seats. He covered them with a blanket. "Rest. We've a long ride."

Tam and Joe's eyes closed.

He reached for Amber's hand and smiled.

Monty slowed the vehicle.

Alex craned his neck to view the scenery through the small window.

"We've reached the river before Union City. I'm not sure about the bridge." Monty said. "It shifted east."

"Can we drive through the river without getting stuck?" Amber asked.

"Let's check."

Alex and Amber stepped out, and walked down to the embankment. It was steep, too steep to drive safely. A thin stream swirled in the simmering August heat. It had been a mighty river. Now, it glimmered, thick and wet, like quicksand. He didn't trust it. The bridge spanned the open, once mighty river, without noticeable cracks underneath. It appeared stable enough.

The vehicle they were in could be too heavy.

"Guess we'll have to do what we did before. You wake Tam and Joe. Follow me, and then the drivers can come across. I don't know what else to do, except turn back."

Amber squeezed his hand, kissed his cheek, and walked back.

He longed to be able to sit and watch her walk. Her grace and ease of motion was refreshing. Fluid and peaceful, unlike the recent jerky motions of the planet.

Alex searched for a branch to use as a stability pole. He had long ago lost the one he had made in the relative safety of Kilauea.

At the bridge he waited until Amber, Tam, and Joe stood beside him. He took Joe's hand. "Come along and help. If you see any cracks let me know."

"Shall we sing the song?" Tam asked.

"Hum it quietly. Don't sing, and don't dance. Tiptoe across as if stepping between hen's eggs." Alex gripped the branch and touched the edge of the bridge. He took the first step onto the bridge.

Joe pulled on his arm. The boy's head bobbed as he glanced all over the bridge. He pointed out lizards and even a scorpion or two hiding in the shadows on the edge of the bridge.

Not all of the animals were alive. A few were shells from bird meals. A turtle ambled toward the side they had left.

Much like the bridge in New Mexico, this bridge was long. A few cracks were visible. None appeared to make the road too dangerous to cross. Yesterday's earthquake could have caused damage that wouldn't be visible from the top of the bridge.

The branch tapped the road off the actual bridge. Alex breathed a sigh of relief as he, Amber, Joe, and Tam walked on a little further, and stood off to the side of the road. They waited silently as Monty picked his way across the bridge. Their driver made it.

The soldiers walked slowly across the bridge in pairs. Once they were all across, the second vehicle waited a few minutes, then drove across. So far, so good.

The third vehicle drove across. It was almost four vehicle lengths away when they heard a loud crack. The vehicle shot forward as a middle section of the bridge crashed down to the dry riverbed.

Alex tightened his grip on Amber and Joe's hands as dust billowed up out of the river bottom.

No one moved until the driver came to a stop beyond them.

Alex exhaled. That had been a narrow escape. The bridge may have been safe for a regular vehicle. Perhaps not an armored vehicle. They would have to find another way back to Fort Sill. Even the heat of summer would not dry out the moist riverbed enough to drive the vehicles through it to return to Fort Sill from this direction.

Before long, they were back on the road. The quick passage through Union City was uneventful. No people were in the streets. Dust covered the streets and buildings. The short drive to El Reno was quiet; everyone was deep in thought. They passed several small reservoirs of water, and saw no one, nor any large animals.

"Almost there," Monty said. "Tam, Joe, you'll have to stay close. I wish we had left you in Tuttle for safety."

"No. We wouldn't be able to return to them," Amber said.

Monty laughed. "I know. This is not a safe place for children."

"Children can warm a hardened heart, sometimes."

"In normal times, perhaps." Monty turned west. "These days, I wouldn't be so sure."

It wasn't wise for any of them to be visiting a federal prison. Especially now with food, water, and power so limited. Of course, Corporal Puma had no one else to send. So it was the volcano and earthquake specialists he had sent, along with two armored vehicles full of soldiers.

The federal prison at El Reno had a backup generator. Last Corporal Puma heard, it worked. They hoped it still did. Radio contact had been lost after the last quake. Most of the soldiers in the second two vehicles would stay behind as relief soldiers. Several who had been sent earlier, were expected to return to base.

The massive gate appeared in front of them. Two armed soldiers waited. Monty pulled up and spoke to one of the soldiers at the gate.

"Hello Stanley, how is it in there?"

"Not good Monty. Food and water are low. Morale can't be much better."

"How long until your soldiers are ready to trade out?"

"Better bring the new ones in first. Let them get acquainted. This is one big complex. We hoped for more soldiers."

"These were all Corporal Puma could spare. In fact, there are only ten relief soldiers. I'm sorry. I have two scientists, and two children with me, as well."

Stanley's shoulders slumped.

There weren't enough soldiers for him to take a break, and perhaps go home as well. If he had a home to go to.

He nodded to the other soldier, and sprung the gate open. No one else was in sight.

As the vehicles rolled inside the gate, Alex's stomach knotted. He wasn't sure about bringing Amber and the children here. They wouldn't be able to escape if something went wrong. The gates clanged shut behind the vehicles.

"Amber, I want you to take Tam and Joe, and wait outside the gates. I'm worried." If they didn't go now, they might not be able to.

"In this heat?" Amber helped Tam and Joe out. "They'd bake. There's no shade."

Heat rose in waves off the stone grey pavement in the empty parking lot. "Stay here then. In the shade of the vehicles. They don't need you to go in there." Their safety was more important than his.

"We'll walk along the fences to check for damage. The bushes will offer some protection from the sun." Amber pulled her backpack close and walked away with the two chatterboxes.

Tam glanced back at him and waved.

He smiled and waved before he joined the soldiers.

"Okay, we have to hurry. The people you are replacing need to be back on the road soon, and out of town before dark," said Stanley. "I'll stay here."

The soldiers marched to the first imposing building.

Alex trailed behind. Corporal Puma had sent him more as a clerk to verify the trade went well, and to determine if more help was needed at the prison.

At the door, the second guard stopped. "The reservoirs are holding out for now. We are rationing water. The generator is working, at partial capacity. With growing some of our own food, and with the reservoirs, we hope to make it through until civilization returns. The soldiers you are replacing are down these main halls. The guards inside will point you where to go."

The guard watched the soldiers go in, and glanced back at the gate frequently. Only Stanley was visible at the gate now.

There should be at least two guards there, with one extra to have walked with them, and wait on the soldier exchange.

Something crashed, dragging him out of his thoughts. Shouts echoed inside, and a gun fired.

"Can you do anything?" The guard yelled to Alex.

Alex shook his head.

The guard rushed inside.

Alex ran after him. He had a gun, and a few bullets. Corporal Puma hadn't been able to find any more ammunition for his weapon.

Inside, the shouts echoed through the halls.

Several soldiers held back a group of maybe seven, or eight, men in prison uniforms. Other soldiers tried to come in behind with handcuffs.

The noise and low lighting levels didn't help. Chairs were scattered across the floor. Someone shouted over the melee, as the sounds grew louder, ringing out of the lobby, and down the hallways. One soldier pointed a tazer at an inmate.

Alex stood rooted to the spot. Should he run and protect Amber, maybe shouting for more soldiers, hiding somewhere? Should he shoot if one came toward him?

The lights flickered, and went out.

Screams echoed.

Then silence.

Alex was next to the door. He knew where the handle was. If he escaped now, maybe he could save Amber and the children. He reached for the knob and almost turned it.

"Don't," Someone said from nearby. "We are all locked in now. Wouldn't want them stampeding out."

Chapter 31

Out of Africa, Arizona

Livia shifted on the uncomfortable seat. Those raiders had unnerved her. If there were more at Out of Africa, she would have to be careful. Most animals were easy to work with, except humans, or recently domesticated animals, gone wild. It had always been fun to be the one kid the adults had trusted around the trick ponies, and show tigers. Show training would come in handy now. If the tigers she met tonight were trained the same way she had known, and would respond to the commands of someone they didn't know, she'd be safe no matter how many raiders arrived.

"Careful," Corbo said.

"Huh?" Livia realized her flailing hands had hit him in the face. Practicing the gestures used to grab the attention of the tigers in such close quarters was not safe.

"Sorry. Trying to remember how to talk to tigers."

Corbo laughed. "As long as you tell them to stay away from me."

"Or protect you." She took his hand, kissed it, and gazed into his eyes. "I wouldn't want any mean old raiders to hurt you. You're all I have."

Corbo leaned back.

He didn't like that kind of attention. Reminding him he was all she had was the only way she knew to hold his heart close. He didn't want her, or anyone else either. Though it stung, if he would let her, she would do her best to provide him a life, and children. Together, they'd build the family she always wanted; children with many siblings, and attentive parents. Even if they did have to learn to live as their ancestors had.

"We'll be there in a few minutes," Kestrel said. "We have no idea what we'll find. A few handlers stayed, for a while at least."

He turned into the oversized, empty parking lot. Dust, and a few weeds, scattered around. A car with no tires and its hood up, rusted by the thin-railed wooden fence. This fence wouldn't hold animals in, or out.

Kestrel parked near the middle of the empty lot, and they all got out. They crept forward, listening for any sounds of humans.

Her heart beat loudly, and her veins pulsed from the pressure. She took a deep a breath to calm her nerves. A broken piece of the wooden fence in front of them would make a tentative weapon.

They reached the open gate.

Livia took a deep breath.

Corbo pulled ahead.

She tugged his hand back, and put her finger to her lips.

He frowned, and waited.

Livia got down on her hands and knees and crawled forward. She peeked around the fence. No one was visible, so she inched forward.

Several buildings obscured her view. No people in sight. No animals, either. Silence prevailed. The community of animals may have already been emptied.

The building to her right was small. One to her left was large, and the one in the distance, equally large. Housing many animals, this park required many paid volunteers to care for all of them. If only a few had been left behind, they could be anywhere in the park.

She stood up, and motioned to Corbo and the soldiers to follow.

They side step walked to the tightly shuttered smaller building on the left. Kestrel, and the other soldiers, wielded weapons of various sorts, guns, rocks, and sticks to scare animals or raiders.

A rattle from the building's shade startled her. She jumped back. A rattlesnake's head peeked out from behind a rock. There was a slight unnatural glisten, so she stepped a bit closer. Sure, enough, it was a prop intended to startle visitors when they walked too close.

Livia almost laughed. This situation was too serious to make light of. A fake snake rattle could draw a real one in, now that the park was deserted. She didn't want to take any chances, even if they wouldn't normally be out in the heat of the day.

"Hello," a voice said.

She spun to face the voice as she raised the broken fence piece.

A woman dropped the bucket she was carrying, and lifted her hands. "Peace, please."

Livia lowered the board. "Are you a keeper here?"

"I'm Valarie, and Harvey is nearby. We aren't open for public tours."

"I wish we could have come when you were open. We are here to check on the keepers left behind, and the animals," Livia said.

Valarie sat the bucket down. "The news isn't good. Two other keepers left to check on a few other local wildlife refuges. They left a month ago. We haven't heard from them."

Livia wanted to reach out to the woman, all alone with those raiders nearby. "Have you had any trouble? How are the animals?"

Tears trickled down Valarie's cheeks. "Best I show you." She picked up her bucket, and went toward the building on the left.

"We moved a bunch of the small animals here for safekeeping. Not sure how many will survive at this rate, and many have become food for other animals, it's all part of the chain of life." Valarie opened the door.

Livia followed, with Corbo right behind her. The odor was noxious, almost knocking them backward. Feathers floated in the dim light from the open door. Skylights had been hastily knocked through the ceiling, to let in a little light and fresh air. They were covered by what looked like screen doors and bolts of material, or maybe paper, to keep the animals in.

"We have feed animals behind that door. Birds over here. Not all of them made it."

"Which ones didn't?"

Valarie smiled oddly, as she pointed at a few empty labeled cages, "What we call the volcano canaries now. The gasses got them. They couldn't fly away to safety."

Valarie sat her bucket down on the floor. "Trying to decide when, and how, to air it out was tough once the first few died. Some are sickly now. They are alive, for the moment."

"That's a lot of trauma for a bird who can't see what's happening, or do anything to protect themselves," Corbo said.

"It's more complex than that as well. You'd think the snakes would be happy. They're not. We aren't sure if more is coming, or what."

"They're restless?" Corbo said.

"It's almost scary. Harvey wants to release them. I think it's too dangerous. They wouldn't live long out there on their own. And they might hurt or kill people, if anyone ever comes back."

Snakes slithered on the glass sides of cages piled in a corner, looking for a way out. Giant snakes, longer than the three of them combined were in one large exhibit labeled "African Parrots." Cardboard boxes separated them, though that certainly wouldn't stop them from reaching each other.

"Do you think they will?" Livia reached her hands to the woman's shoulders.

"No." Tears streaked down Valarie's dusty face. "I think it will be too bad. Something else is coming. I'm sure. I dream about it. Harvey tries to reassure me, it won't."

They had a lot to do, and not much time. She reached her arm out to Valarie. "Come on, what about the bigger animals?"

"We've moved them all closer. The lions and tigers are guarding the other animals. And us at night."

Valarie led the way out of the building, back into the intense sunlight.

The smell out here was fresh baked rock and sand. A relief. Livia took a deep breath to clear her lungs. "It's overpowering."

Valarie nodded. "And abuse. If power doesn't come back soon, we will have to release them, or they may all die of disease. We can't keep them anywhere else right now. It's tough enough taking care of them here."

She led the way further into the park pointing out the buildings. "We pulled pieces from that one when it crumpled. The quakes did a lot more damage here than anyone would have suspected. The buildings weren't up to quake code, I guess."

Some of the buildings looked as if they would collapse any minute. Walls leaned, roofs partially caved in. Sand and dust had made small mounds next to the smaller buildings, helping hold them up. Larger buildings stood more solid, perhaps constructed at an earlier time, of better materials. Livia wouldn't trust them either.

They walked on down the dirt path, past trams that would never run again.

"There's enough fuel to drive them to the buildings. I doubt it would help them stand up."

"Not enough to leave?" Livia asked.

"No. We have nowhere to go. This place has been my family. My home for years. It's all Harvey and I have."

They reached a small outbuilding. It leaned sideways, a dilapidated shed, more than a building. The whole place had an air of neglect. The sandy, bushy terrain reminded her of the dusty, dry, empty desert all around them. The animals were fenced in with few options for finding locally available food or water.

As they walked up to the fence, a few animals lounging nearby lifted up their heads, and swiveled to see the people. A few giraffe, zebras, ostriches, antelope, and other grazers were all crowded in a small grassless pen together.

Behind a split fence, with fresh mounds of dirt holding it in place, were the predators. Lions and tigers napped in one section. Wolves and hyenas lazed in the other. A man leaned on a shovel next to a pair of wolves.

"No hope Valarie. There isn't any water left. I have no idea where the water table is here, if there even is one below us."

One wolf tottered over to him, tongue lolling, and collapsed at his feet.

Valarie leaned against the grazer's fence.

All of the animals were thinner than they should be, and their tongues lolled. Grazers rested, not bothering to stand and eat the few remaining shoots as afternoon edged into early evening.

"We have one option left. Early morning, I guess we'll release the animals." Harvey nibbled a handful of peanuts.

"Where will they find water?" Corbo asked.

Harvey walked to the new fencerow. "We can take them to the swimming pool. There's some water left there. It'll be sad to see them go."

A soldier tossed a small rock at a fallen tree. "Wouldn't it be better to let them go at night, when they can travel further in cooler air?"

"It would be better for them. We don't have any guards. Unless you want to stay," Harvey said.

"It's our duty to see to the welfare of the people, and the animals."

Harvey waved his hand at the starving animals. "You can see they are starving, and dying of thirst. If we let them go, a few might stand a chance, if they can revert to instincts."

Livia drained her water bottle. "It's sad to think of the animals who had been raised by people released into the wild with no one

to protect them." It was far better to give them a chance than to watch them starve in pens. Maybe a few would survive, and populate the plains with lions, tigers, and even zebras for future generations. If surviving humans didn't eat them all first.

"At last no motor vehicles will run them down, or confuse them," Harvey said. "With few humans in the area, they might be able to learn from other wild animals."

"We'll help release them," Livia said. "About dusk we can herd the carnivores out and encourage them to go north. Let them begin their journeys. In the middle of the night, we can take the grazers out. Try to steer them southwest. There may be grazing grounds that way."

Harvey waved, picked up his shovel, and walked back toward the buildings.

"He'll join us soon. These animals have been around people all their lives. I hope they can survive." Valarie wiped her eyes and brow.

The animals rested in what shade they could find.

"They are sturdy enough. They should do fine. As long as they can reproduce, they will add to our country's growing population of wild things. Maybe it's what the endangered species need," Corbo said.

"Some can reproduce. Others have been spayed or neutered. It was the right thing to do at the time," Valarie said.

Livia closed her eyes. Spaying and neutering had once seemed like such a good idea for overpopulation, both for animals and humans. One reason she, Nathan, and Josie had kept so busy helping the illegal immigrants. To be kept perpetually without a family was be a nightmare she never wanted to face.

Spayed females, especially the cats, would never have their brains mature in certain ways, ways that would protect them from harm on the plains they would now face. As for the males, they could lose their feeling of purpose in life. Some would live, would some die, while many would be eaten by starving humans.

The evening sun drifted toward the horizon in the August heat. Predators became restless, and eyed the grazers differently than they had earlier in the day.

One of the antelope it staggered to its feet, let out a call, and came closer to the small group of humans huddled next to the falling apart feeding structure.

Lions roared. Tigers paced. Wolves and hyenas howled.

Shivers crept up Livia's spine.

"They are getting hungry," Harvey said. "They've never hunted before. Now, they want to go after an antelope they've known since their births. The horses are in another pen, time to bring them here and release the hungry lions."

Harvey returned with the three transport trained horses. He would ride as bait for the predators, leading them away from the grazers.

Corbo and Livia rode behind the fenced in predators to help drive them after Harvey. There had been a little time to plan a course of action. Her circus training would make all the difference now, in their lives, and the lives of all the park animals.

Zebras not used to be ridden, ran up to greet the horses.

Livia shooed them away.

Kestrel, and most of the soldiers, grabbed pieces of the fallen wood from the shelter, and followed behind Livia and Corbo.

Wolves and hyenas were first to be turned loose. A few well-thrown rocks startled them in the direction they were supposed to go. At the pool, the wolves drank deeply. Hyenas cackled and capered as they drank the dirty water.

Lions roared in the distance. It was an eerie echo.

Wolves bounded off, in the opposite direction of the lion's roars.

Hyenas cackled, and shoved each other into the direction of the lion's roar. They too trotted off on their own into the coming night.

As second trip brought the lions and tigers to the pool. It was an uneasy, noisy scene, as the animals watched each other drink. Before long, they ambled off in different directions. Lions and tigers swatted each other before they ambled off separately.

The people rested at the once polar bear swimming pool for a bit. That one-third of a mile each way, while chasing semi-tame animals had added up. Closer to three quarters of a mile twice, and one-third of a mile ride back.

"The lions and tigers may interbreed if they go off together," Corbo said.

"It's happened before," Livia said. "Most people think the offspring can't reproduce."

"We don't know for sure," Valarie said. "Generally, they are sterilized. Or kept apart from others, both lions, and tigers. We may end up with a new species or two, in a century or more."

"Ligons are the same size and build as the extinct American lion. Perhaps, they will come back," Harvey said.

"Better get the rest of the animals." Livia hobbled over to the horse she had ridden.

Harvey turned his horse for the last roundup of the night. "We'll race back and herd the grazers this way."

It had taken all the soldiers to move the lions and tigers. Grazers had been left on their own. If the raiders had followed them, some of the grazers might be food already.

Corbo and Livia raced behind him.

Valarie and the soldiers would catch up with them when they could.

They raced as fast as they dared go.

Barking dogs broke the evening stillness. The closer they got, the sound of barking dogs increased.

She didn't remember seeing dogs earlier in the day. The upcoming scene could pet dogs gone wild, or raiders with dogs.

Chapter 32

Out of Africa to Phoenix, Arizona

Corbo raced his horse on ahead as the dogs barked louder. The stars and moon shone enough to see the ground ahead. Horse hooves pounded the dusty track.

Other sounds began to permeate the air. Stampeding and bellowing hoofed animals, with nowhere to go. He had almost reached the enclosure when he saw the commotion at the fence, close to where they had sat and ate, hours before.

The herds bellowed, dogs barked, and a crash rang through the night. The sound of pounding hooves raced away. Corbo's tired mount could not catch up. Soon, Livia and Harvey were beside him.

In moments, they reached the shattered gate.

The barking dogs were near.

Banging, pounding, and bird screeches echoed around the barks. They glanced at each other, and pushed the tired horses toward the entrance. Dogs wouldn't normally go after birds. Saving the caged animals was what mattered now.

They caught up with the barking dogs at the first building. Birds screeched and screamed. Dogs tried to break in the door. One had jumped on some piles of something, and climbed to the roof.

Corbo jumped off. The ground felt unsteady. He had been on a horse for hours, so that didn't surprise him. He took one step forward.

The ground began to rumble.

His horse neighed, and jumped back.

Livia and Harvey's horses took off toward the now open corral.

Corbo moved backwards, trying to stay out of the way.

Rumbling grew louder.

Buildings began to shake.

His damaged knee buckled under him.

The dogs stopped barking. They cowered, and howled.

One big dog, who hadn't been wild long, ran directly into Corbo, knocking him backwards several feet. The dog then sat on his legs.

The ground shook violently.

The wall in front of Corbo shifted in, and out, like an accordion. With one final twist inward, it fell, right at his feet.

He screamed as the ground vibrated from the falling wall.

Birds screeched louder as cages tumbled apart. A few had escaped their cages, and burst into the air.

Corbo was unable to move, while the ground shook. The tremor finally stilled, and the big dog jumped off his legs and bounded off with the other dogs toward the wreckage of the building.

There was little hope of saving any birds that had not escaped. In the dark, they wouldn't be able to see to do so. It was too dangerous anyway. The walls could fall on them, trapping them underneath, with no hope of rescue.

Galloping hooves echoed through the night.

Livia and Harvey rode up beside him.

"Are you okay?" Livia asked.

Corbo nodded, and then realized she might not be able to see a nod. "I'll be fine. My leg is sore. One of the dogs saved me. Dr. Rebecca, or Amber, would know what the magnitude of that quake was."

Debris from the falling buildings shifted as the noisy dogs searched for dead and dying birds to eat. Living birds circled overhead and screeched. Another crash sounded as some distant building finished its descent to the ground.

"I don't think that building was in the park," Harvey said. "Lots of office buildings are nearby. It may have been one of them."

A few moments later, the soldiers caught up with them.

"Are you all okay?" Kestrel asked.

"Okay," Corbo said. "Let's go. If you can safely see the road."

"What about the horses?" Livia had gotten off her horse; and wrapped her arms around Valarie when arrived and saw the destruction.

"They can find safety. They can see better than us." Harvey reached for the buckle on the bridle to loosen it.

Valarie reached up and grabbed the horse's mane. "I don't want to let them go. We've lost everything else."

Harvey pulled her close to him and whispered. "We have each other. We will find more people and be safe. We did everything we could."

"We've lost our papers. Our identification, everything. They were in the bird house."

"So have millions of others. We are alive. Let's go with Corbo and Livia. Help them on whatever their quest is." Harvey hugged Valarie close, and she let go of the horse's bridle.

The three horses snorted, and raced off together in the direction the other herds had gone.

He might not be alone anymore. People everywhere would be without proof of who they were, and how long they had lived here. Even without a birth certificate, he might now be able to apply for citizenship of the only country he had ever known.

They walked to the vehicles in the parking lot. It would be a long, hard drive. Harvey and Valarie crowded into the front vehicle with Corbo and Livia. He didn't mind. They could sleep, and the soldiers could drive.

"What should be a half hour drive will be much longer. We need a short nap. We should be safe in here." Kestrel turned to doze.

Corbo held Livia close. In this crazy new world, he'd have to take care of her as much as she took care of him. He thought he would stay awake.

The first rays of sunlight peeked in the front window. His knee ached, more pain from the fall last night.

Livia's head nestled on his shoulder.

He lifted the hair from her eyes.

She mumbled, and then pulled away.

Before long they were on the road. Or, what was left of a road. Asphalt was pitted and marked with long, deep cracks. Heavy-duty tires allowed them to dodge the largest ruts, and keep going.

An hour passed, and they reached the first town, an apparently deserted hamlet. Sand and dirt covered the road. A few dogs rested in the shade of the buildings, tongues already lolling from the heat wave.

They passed the town. Kestrel glanced back at them. "About half-way to Phoenix now. We'll stop at the Phoenix Zoo. See how they are doing, and then go on."

The soldier beside him glanced at Livia and back at Kestrel.

With a hand motion, Kestrel turned back to the road.

Kestrel wasn't saying something.

Corbo's heart fluttered. What was this trip really about?

Livia's hand touched his knee.

Focusing on her wasn't easy. His feared they might be dumped without fuel, vehicle, or rations somewhere in the desert.

A few miles down, Kestrel stopped. "Let's take a short break. Girls, over there by those low bushes, watch for snakes."

Corbo followed him back to where the other soldiers stood. Harvey had stayed behind with the women.

"This next town is basically a suburb of Phoenix. No telling what we may meet. Be prepared for anything. We are low on fuel. There should be some fuel at the reactor, if nowhere sooner."

They chose some food from the packs and climbed back in. Corbo's hands trembled as he ate. He held Livia close. The quakes were maddening, and who knew what damage they had done in this area. They were running from the volcanoes, the most fractured part of the state, and straight to a nuclear reactor. Anything could happen.

"I see a cloud of smoke," Kestrel said.

Corbo held Livia tighter.

"Be prepared."

Corbo reached for his gun. "Is the radio working?"

Kestrel checked the radio in the vehicle. Nothing. Not even static.

Corbo's shoulders slumped. It was too late to turn back. If the reactor, or downtown, was on fire; either, would be devastating. The column of smoke rose, and drifted on the light upper atmospheric breeze. He gripped the gun until his knuckles turned white.

Chapter 33

El Reno, to Kingfisher Oklahoma

Amber, Tam, and Joe sat by the tree in what little shade there was. Twigs and leaves on the cracked ground were toys for the moment. All they had now, and perhaps for many years to come.

Alex walked off with the soldiers, and stood by the door.

Amber only partially paid attention to the children between her and Alex.

A crash and gunshot resounded out the prison door.

Tam and Joe rushed to her arms.

Alex ran inside the door.

Amber stood up and pulled Tam and Joe closer.

Moments passed. He didn't come back out. Something was wrong.

"Stanley."

Stanley walked up to her. "I can't leave my post."

Amber glanced at the gate. "It's locked?"

"Yes."

"We have to go. Alex wasn't supposed to go in. He hasn't come back out."

He glanced at the door, and stepped back. He pulled out his radio, and pressed the button.

Static.

Then silence.

"Is anyone alive in there?" Stanley spoke into the radio.

Static.

Amber pulled Tam and Joe closer. Her heart beat fast. Scary thoughts fluttered through her mind so fast, she couldn't quite catch them before they were gone. She didn't want anything to happen to Alex. He was her last link to her mom. A tear trickled down her cheek as Tam and Joe tried to wiggle free.

"Here. Lights out. Doors locked." A voice on the radio, cackled.

Stanley's curses rivaled an Egyptian curse catalog.

Amber covered the children's ears. "Can you get them out?"

"We are too short of help. I'm not supposed to leave my post. Everyone else is inside though."

"Can I do it?"

"Highly irregular. Not allowed." Stanley said.

Alex was in danger, as was every other person in there.

"Do they have air in there?"

The man's face went pale. "Without the generators, I'm not sure. It was built tight."

"So, it's an airless tomb. As soon as it runs out of oxygen, they are all dead. I'm going. Tell me what to do."

Amber hugged the children. "Tam, Joe. I need you to stay here. Stay in the shade here, under this tree. Can you do that?" She smoothed each face tenderly with her hand.

Tam nodded and took Joe's hand. He leaned up against her and shivered despite the heat.

"What do I need to do?" Amber waited on Stanley to answer.

"You can't do it alone. I have the code. I'll have to cover you, and the gate both."

Amber glanced to the gate. No people visible. No one nearby either. "Tam and Joe can cover the locked gate. Let's go."

Amber grabbed his hand, and half dragged him to the building.

He pulled away, and hurried to one side. "I'll key in the code. You open the door when I say so. This wasn't supposed to happen. We should have twenty or thirty guards here."

"Well, you don't have them. You have me." Amber tapped her foot waiting on the word.

"Pull."

She closed her eyes and jerked the door open.

Alex fell out into her arms, panting, and red-faced.

Amber held him close a minute, and kissed his forehead.

"Have to. Help others." Alex mumbled.

She rubbed his forehead and glanced in the door. People were strewn as far as the sunlight showed. No visible movement. "No. Let them care for themselves."

No one was coming out on their own. She helped Alex to stand, led him down the steps, and out to a nearby tree. She sat him lightly on the ground and kissed his cheek.

"Stay here. Rest."

He leaned on his side, trying to sit. "Take." He held out the gun.

Amber took the gun and patted his forehead. The walk back to the building was the longest walk she remembered.

Stanley stood in the doorway, mouth drooping as he peered inside.

Her feet hit the steps.

He lifted his right arm. "Stay back. There is no hope."

Sunlight peeked through the door, reminding Amber of a horror movie. People and furniture sprawled in complete disorder. An odor wafted from the building, one that shouldn't be there. Her throat burned the closed she walked. "Are you sure?"

Stanley wet his finger, held it in the air. "Stand over here. Peek in."

Terrified faces met her gaze. Mouths agape, hands clasped around their necks. One man in a prison uniform had managed to grab a guard's backpack. Those closest to him had the most distorted faces.

Amber stepped back. "What happened?"

Stanley stepped to the side. "We have to let it air out. They used up the oxygen too fast."

"Alex survived."

"He was by the door. He may not have known what was happening when the inmate grabbed the tear gas canister. Plus, he was protected by all of the other men," Stanley said.

Amber grabbed a handkerchief out of her pocket. "I've got to try. Stay, or help me."

She covered her nose and mouth with the handkerchief in one hand, and ventured in the doorway. Those furthest away were dead from lack of oxygen, and reactions to the tear gas. Those closest to the door, might be alive, if they had protected their faces.

First, she checked a man who had been closest to Alex. He groaned as she rolled him over, and a radio fell out of his hand and clattered to the ground. Amber waved to Stanley.

He took a deep breath and plunged in. Once he grabbed the man's shoulder's, he dragged him out; bumping his feet down the steps to safety.

Amber moved to the next soldier. She checked his pulse. There might have been a stir, she couldn't tell.

When Stanley came back, she pointed at him, and raised her eyebrow in a questioning manner.

She turned to the next body.

Stanley grabbed the second and pulled him out into the broiling sunshine.

The third person was a pregnant soldier who had pulled her uniform over her face. Underneath, she was breathing, though it was shallow.

Tears rolled down Amber's cheeks. She pointed the woman out to Stanley as he came back to the door.

Stanley took a deep breath, and stepped forward.

Amber jumped, as the woman grabbed her arm.

Stanley grabbed the soldier's arms, and pulled on her.

Amber dropped her handkerchief, and took the woman's legs.

Soon, the few who were alive were waking up on the ground outside. Shade trees had been few, and now they weren't enough. No prisoners had survived.

Tam and Joe had been sent to a small storage area on the side of the building to find buckets of water and spare uniforms. Everyone had to be washed, and clothes changed. The process was slow and tedious, so as not to contaminate the clean clothes, or their eyes and mouths.

There weren't enough guard uniforms to go around. Amber and Alex ended up in prison garb.

Alex laughed as Amber tried to dress him after washing him down good. He could barely sit up.

"What happened?"

"A gas canister went off," Amber said. "And with no air circulation, it was a death trap in minutes."

"I don't remember anything." Alex lifted his hand to his head.

"I imagine not."

"How many made it out?"

"Not enough. Plus, we are in trouble." Stanley pointed to the young woman soldier who groaned and grasped her sides.

Alex glanced at the woman. "Is anyone left alive in there?"

Stanley shook his head. "We have to take her to Kingfisher. She may die. They have doctors there. You all need treatment."

"Amber, bring the children. Stanley, we need you to help us all in the vehicle, and drive us," Alex said.

"I, I can't leave my post."

Alex reached out and grabbed the man's shoulders. "You don't have a post if everyone is dead. Your job now is to save those of us clinging to life."

"I can't. Corporal Puma."

Alex leveled his gaze with the man. "Corporal Puma's orders and mine are the same. He gave me the authority to decide what was best if need be, for the men and women on this expedition. Isn't this what you would do?"

"I'll take your word," Stanley said.

Alex slumped to the ground. "No need. There's a letter in my bag. Catch my breath, then I'll help."

Alex couldn't help much. Fumes overcame him, as well as the rest of them.

Stanley helped load the pregnant woman into the vehicle. They then each took one side of the other two rescued soldiers, helping them up and into the vehicle.

Amber came back one last time for Alex. "You okay?"

"Tired. Need food and water," he said.

She helped him up, and walked to the vehicle with him leaning on her.

"Amber, can you drive?" Stanley asked.

"I need to be back there with her. I don't know the way," Amber said.

"Drive to outside the gate. I have to lock it tight," Stanley said. "I hope I can lock it from outside. If not, I know a way."

Amber had only tried for her permit a few months before they left California. Driving a loaded van shouldn't be that much more difficult than a compact car. At least not through these giant gates meant for delivery vehicles.

She lurched the vehicle forward, almost throwing everyone off their seats.

"Sorry."

Alex groaned. "Here, let me talk you through it."

With Alex and Stanley giving directions, Amber managed to drive through the gate, and park the vehicle.

She climbed in the back with the woman who was in labor. Chances were high her baby would be stillborn.

Tam rubbed the woman's forehead with a damp cloth.

The woman looked up at Amber with crossed worry lines above her eyebrows.

"What's your name?" Amber sat on the vehicle floor, and glanced from Tam to the woman.

"Kelly," the woman said, and then groaned.

Stanley stepped into the vehicle. "It's fifteen miles. I'll go as fast as I dare. How is she?"

Amber glanced up at him. She didn't dare speak.

Alex crawled back to her and checked on Kelly. "Tam, where is your grandmother's quilt?"

Within minutes, they had Kelly undressed, with the quilt spread out under her, and a sleeping bag covering her. Amber held her hand, and tried to talk to her, to comfort her. It was all she knew to do.

"Baby is all I have." The woman said between breaths. "Husband dead."

Alex pulled Amber close.

The woman panted and tears rolled down her cheek. "Don't let it die."

Amber rubbed Kelly's hand, and checked her dilation, not that she knew that much about it. As a child, she had heard a few women give birth in those remote villages they explored in South America. She had never been in their homes during the process.

"Try to relax. It'll be okay. We'll have you to real doctors soon."

"Too late." Her panting stopped. Kelly screamed.

Amber covered her ears.

"Be there soon. Hold on." Stanley shouted.

Amber held Kelly's hand. "Let your body do it naturally. Listen to it."

Kelly grunted and pushed.

The baby's head peeked out between Kelly's legs.

Amber closed her eyes one-second, and glanced to see where Tam and Joe were. She reached forward. "Kelly, the baby is coming. I will do my best."

Kelly screamed, and pushed.

Amber gritted her teeth as the baby emerged onto the quilt. There was no way it was sanitary. Of course, our ancestors didn't deliver in sanitary situations either, and they survived. It might stay this way, and people would have to learn to live like this.

One more scream, and the baby was almost out. Amber reached for it, hoping that holding the infant would give it some warmth and hope, even if it was already dead. She slipped her hands under the infant, and it slithered out, into her grasp.

Kelly grunted and groaned as Amber laid the bloody, mucus covered infant body onto her chest.

Alex patted the baby's back.

Amber sat back, confused and scared. The baby wouldn't live if no one knew what to do. How many people did know what to do to naturally keep a newborn infant alive? Surely keeping a newborn alive was instinctive. Maybe little girls learned from watching their mother's give birth. None of her education had prepared her for this moment. Not even her own scientific studies of history.

She pulled Tam and Joe close. A human birth was something they would never have seen a few months ago.

Chapter 34

El Reno, to Kingfisher Oklahoma

Alex held Kelly's hand as she struggled to breath. The pregnancy shouldn't have ended now, or she wouldn't have been at the prison. The baby was premature. How early, he couldn't tell. So much blood was on the quilt, it looked like too much to lose and live.

The vehicle swerved hard to the right.

"Almost there."

It stopped with a jolt that sent Alex on top of the baby, and Kelly. Stanley blasted the horn long, and loud.

The baby cried.

Alex sat up. At least one life was saved. He backed up as Amber tried to help him up.

"Your face is covered in the baby's blood. Take it. Is it a boy, or girl?"

Alex shakily stood, and picked up the baby.

Kelly stared ahead. Her chest didn't rise.

"Girl." He backed out of the walkway.

Amber glanced at Kelly, and her face clouded.

"Come on. We need to leave, so the doctors can help everyone else." Alex turned to Tam and Joe.

They tried to walk through the vehicle littered with belongings.

"Wish we could help," Monty said. "I know your wife is tired."

The words cheered him up. Perhaps he and Amber should marry. Everyone would expect it now. If Kelly didn't live, who would take this baby? And who would feed it? It was doubtful they would find formula these days.

Alex hugged the naked, bloody newborn tightly to his prison garb covered chest.

Three men and a woman rushed out of the building. They stopped when they saw him standing there, naked bloody baby in his arms, children at his side.

"Kelly, in there, needs you." He nodded toward the vehicle.

Alex slid to the ground against a tire.

The baby slid to his lap and clasped his hand.

One of the other soldiers came out and handed him a shirt to wrap around the infant. The sun was still warm. It would be going down soon. They had to find suitable clothing, shelter, and food for all of them.

Alex leaned back against the tire. It wasn't comfortable. His arms slipped from the baby.

Dizziness enveloped him. A roaring sound disturbed his thoughts. Something. Supposed to be doing something. Everything was dark. He tried to move, and his muscles didn't work. He tried to scream, and couldn't. Soon, the spiraling was out of control.

A pressure on his arm startled him.

"Alex? Alex?"

His eyes opened. A pretty young woman crouched in front of him. It wasn't Amber. He struggled to move his arms and legs.

"Relax. You had a hard day. Be still."

"Amber." He tried to yell. The sound was low and sluggish.

Tam grabbed his hand. "She's busy. Wake up."

The rush of the last few days hit him. He groaned and lifted his hand to his forehead. "Am I going to be okay?"

"You'll be fine. Too much adrenaline, and a rough last few days. This little girl has been telling us what you did," the woman said.

"Girl? Baby girl?"

"She's fine. You did the best you could. When you wake up, we'll help you inside."

The woman tried to stand up.

Alex grabbed her arm as she turned away. "Kelly?"

The woman faced away from Alex, and then bent back down. "Rest, Alex. You did the best you could. No one could have saved her. Even if there had been a hospital at the prison."

The woman stood up and walked into the building.

Tam stayed outside with him.

Alex's eyes rested on her head.

"Everyone else hobbled inside. Someone will be out soon to help you. Joe is with the other men."

Monty had called Amber his wife. He wanted her to be his wife, more than ever now. They would be responsible for three children. Laughing, he tried to sit up more comfortably.

Tom had agreed to care for Karen, Amber's best friend, and her unborn baby. Would Tom ever know that in a few days Alex had managed to scrape up three kids to be a father to?

Was he ready for that? He and Amber should have some time to themselves before kids came along. If Mother Nature ever slowed down her parade of earthquake and volcanic eruptions, of course.

Two doctors came out and helped Alex to his feet, supporting him as they walked through the open doors.

"You have no idea the fright you gave us, all blood covered in that outfit." One of them helped him lay down on one of the hospital beds.

Alex tried to laugh. "I need to see Amber."

"She'll be here in a minute. We'll take you to her."

"Is she okay?"

"Nothing a little warm tea and some good food won't fix. If only that would work for all of you."

"Will the other soldiers be okay?"

"Sure." The man steered the bed down the hall. "A warm bath, hot food, and a good night's sleep should work. We don't have anything else. Not much else is needed, at least not until now."

Alex's eyes vibrated closed and then opened slowly. The men glanced at each other over the bed. Amber wasn't in trouble. She could escape. He couldn't hold his eyes open any longer.

The air grew denser, and warmer. There was no air circulation here, few windows, and they were all glued shut. The bed bumped to a stop. His eyes opened, and Amber stood in front of him, holding a cup.

He smiled up to her, and tried to reach out. His arm felt like lead.

"Alex, I'm so glad you're safe."

"Why do I feel so bad?"

"You were without oxygen, and that tear gas. Then, all the excitement over the birth. You'll be fine. They are going to give you an IV. You are badly dehydrated. Everyone else got water on the trip here."

A nurse stood beside him. The needle went into his arm, and the bag swung above his head.

His eyes closed.

He woke later to flickering light and stretched out his arm. The IV was gone, and a bandage replaced it. He tried to sit up.

Amber sat at a small table, reading by candle light.

"Air's not bad here."

She looked up, smiled, and brushed her hair back. "Nope. Not bad at all. They broke a bunch of windows so we would have a cross breeze, with none flowing directly into the rooms. It works. Feel okay?"

"Sure. Where are the kids?"

Amber closed the book she was reading and walked over to the hospital bed. "Tam and Joe are asleep on the floor over there. Their quilt is cleaned. It's hanging to dry as a clothes changing line."

She was beautiful. Someone had found a light yellow shirt, and pale blue shorts for her to wear. They had even changed him while he slept. He couldn't see the colors too well in the shade, as she stepped in front of the candle light. She reached over and kissed him.

He drew her closer. "What about the baby?"

Amber kissed his cheek. "The nurse has her. We haven't named her. She should be fine."

"She has no one. So, I guess we will take her. I want to name her."

Amber touched his forehead. "You can. I don't know if I want a third child to care for so soon. You can have her."

Alex pulled her close, tight against him. "Amber, we need to get married. Monty already thinks we're married. We can raise the children together, and maybe even have a few of our own."

She pulled away from him.

"Amber, what's wrong." He tried to sit up on the table bed.

She closed off, crossing her arms on her chest. "Alex, I don't think so."

He pulled her close. "I thought you love me. You know I love you."

She rested her head on his shoulder. After several minutes, she pulled back, and looked deep into his eyes. "Alex, it's a tough world out there. I don't want to have to wonder what happened to you every day."

"You'll always be beside me."

"No, Alex. The world is dangerous, far more dangerous now. It's not like when dad." Her words trailed off.

"What about your dad?"

"Dad got lost on one of our trips. We never found him. Mom stayed for a year. When she came home, she wanted to move on. Legally, she couldn't. Brandon would have gladly married her."

"And if your dad had come home?" Alex held her hand.

"I don't know. Mom had changed so. And I'm sure dad had too. I don't want to marry. It tends to lock people into sorrow they can't leave. Let's live happily together as long as we can. Then if one of us needs to move on, we both can. We maintain our independence, while being together. Sometimes, couples are happier that way."

Alex held her as close as he could. It wasn't what he wanted. His tears mingled with hers. She could change her mind. Their jobs were dangerous. His dad hadn't moved on after his mother's death. There had been some closure. Perhaps in another year or two, his dad would have married Tom's mom. That would have been nice.

Amber squeezed his hand. "I know you would never hurt me. I knew kids whose parents couldn't move away from severe abuse because of marriage. I don't want that happening to me, or our kids. I want to teach them something better. I want to teach them to maintain their independence, while learning to live together. People should feel safe standing up for themselves, and turn away those who hurt themselves and others. Consequences should take the abuser out of the community, not allow them to remain in it, and dictate the lives of their victims."

She reached around him, pulled him close, and kissed his nose. "Tomorrow will be better in the daylight, I promise. Sleep now."

"You need to sleep too."

She pressed her forehead to his. "I will. I have a cot over there, by the door." She blew out the candle, and walked away.

Alex had a tough time drifting back to sleep. He had hoped to marry Amber someday. That dream meant everything to him. His dad and his mom being together so long was what he always expected for his own future. Amber expected something different. If he wanted to stay with Amber, he couldn't have that, at least not like his dreams.

Daylight drifted in through the window. Alex sat up, rubbed his head, and realized he had no idea where anything was. His bladder gurgled. Those fluids had done some good at least.

He slipped out of the bed. With his arms held out, he found where Amber slept on the cot. He kissed her.

She opened her eyes and smiled.

"Restroom?"

"Down the hall, and to the right," she mumbled.

By the time he was refreshed and back, she had sat up.

"Tam and Joe are down the hall with the nurse. We can go in a minute." She pulled him close to her. Tenderly she kissed his ear, and rubbed his back. "I do love you. I hope you understand."

Heat flowed through his body. He kissed her forehead, and rubbed her back. "Thank you for saving me." He truly meant it. Even if he couldn't have that piece of paper his parents had. He would love her however she wanted to be loved. He nibbled on her ear. Electricity shot through his body.

"Hey, I'll race you." Joe shouted.

Alex groaned as he pulled away. The physical and mental pain from the embrace remained present as Joe crashed into his legs, with Tam right behind.

Tam laughed at them as she stopped, feet away. "Come see the baby."

Alex took her hand, and Joe's. "Okay, let's go."

The baby slept in a drawer placed on a table in a room a few doors down.

Alex reached out and touched her tiny clean fingers. "What shall we call you? Your mother's name was Kelly. How about Ellie?"

The baby cooed and gurgled as he picked her up, Tam and Joe clamored beside him. "You like Ellie then? Okay, Ellie it is."

He held her close in his arms, trying to forget the pain in Kelly's eyes the last time he saw her. Alex tried to read the emotion in Amber's eyes. He could almost imagine this child was her baby. Silly thought. He'd known Amber less than six months. It had been the best six months of his life. Now, he would have this baby, even if she left him. She had said so.

Amber reached around and held him. "We better take her outside. They will do the funeral soon, and we want her to know she was there."

Alex carried the tiny bundle in his arms. "How will she be fed?"

Amber laughed, and slapped his back. "Well, I guess we'll be buying a goat."

"With what? Plastic don't work anymore." Alex laughed as they walked out the open back door.

One of the doctors stood outside the door. "We had been going to do some new construction. The foundation for the new building has become the unmarked grave of many. Kelly is resting in her corner now."

To the left was a large open pit. The two doctors, and the nurses, stood there, holding shovels. Beyond the pit, was a concrete pad with the symbols that signified it was the hospital heliport.

Alex walked forward. The ceremony wasn't much. Each person there stepped forward, even Tam and Joe, to turn loose a handful of dirt upon the body. Two of the rescued soldiers waited by the grave; too weak to help bury Kelly.

Tam and Joe pulled Alex to the heliport, as the doctors covered the body. He couldn't see much civilization beyond the hospital boundaries. Open desert scrubland from the boundaries to the horizon. Growing up, he never imagined spending the rest of his life in such a dry place. Going anywhere else, with trees, shade, and a beach, was out of the question now. Even if Amber wanted to, there was no transportation to take them there.

As he held Ellie close, the ground began to shake.

He sat the baby down, and leaned over her, to shield her from debris. They were far from the fault lines here.

The ground continued to shift and slide.

Tam and Joe grabbed hold of his arms.

Amber ran toward them.

Parts of the hospital walls crashed.

Alex closed his eyes, and protected the children as best he could.

Chapter 35

New River, Arizona, through Lake Pleasant to WildLife World Zoo

The distant fire crept closer as the followed the deserted road. Livia held Corbo's hand, and snuggled closer to his shoulder. There weren't any map marked volcanic regions near Phoenix. Not that that seemed to matter anymore. It could be looters, rioters, or hungry survivors.

A campfire burned in a large open area in front of a group of storage buildings. A median, and a stretch of northbound road, separated them from the fire. A pile of wood teetered nearby. Various objects were strewn about. No people were visible.

"Should we stop?" Kestrel asked.

Livia didn't know anything about this town. These people needed help. A fire was the best way to find help, and trouble, these days.

"Better check it out," One of the soldiers said. "For their safety, and ours."

The sun peeked over the horizon, as they crossed the land between the two sides of interstate. At the far edge, Kestrel stopped.

"Livia you stay here. It isn't safe," Corbo said.

Livia put her hand on Corbo's shoulder. "You're not going without me. We need each other. Neither of us can walk well."

He smiled at her. "Okay, if you say so."

He helped her out. Harvey and Valarie stood beside them. The soldiers stood near, guns ready.

Several people appeared over the ridge holding guns. One woman waved her gun. "Who are you?"

"We're part of the military unit, checking things out. Who are you?" Kestrel said.

The woman stepped forward and slightly lowered her gun. "We are the only residents left in town trying to find help. We want to leave, and don't have any fuel available."

"You have guns," Kestrel said.

Early morning light illuminated the woman. "Guns won't get us out of town."

"Are there more?"

"Yanda, trust them." A visibly pregnant woman stepped forward.

Yanda glanced at her and then pointed. "Plenty, in the gun shop over there."

"Is there any ammunition available?" Kestrel stepped forward.

"No," Yanda said. "Then what protection would we have?"

"Guns will only kill a few animals, then what will you do for food?" Livia said.

The woman stomped her foot. "If you take us with you, and the guns stay in our hands."

"That might be a good idea. Where would you like to go?"

Yanda eyed him, and then looked at the rest of the soldiers. Her eyes rested last on Livia.

"Most of us used to work for the Phoenix Zoo as relief workers. They sent us to my sister's shop to buy more tranquilizer guns and ammo. Raiders attacked, and stole our vehicle. We've been staying in the school, over yonder." She pointed to a large complex of buildings a block or so away. Debris littered the front drive area.

"I guess we don't care anymore, now that we are out of food. Probably, the animals have starved by now. We have to know," Yanda said.

"We released the animals at the Out of Africa Wildlife Park," said Livia. "If any caretakers are still at the zoo, the animals might be alive. At least some of them. That quake was bad."

"That wasn't smart, they'll starve," Yanda said.

"Volcanoes are erupting. Communication systems are down. Better to release the animals than to leave them to starve in their cages. They might learn to forage for food," Livia said.

"Until some of them become the new invasive species."

"Perhaps. Animals can naturally invade and become invasive without human help. Who knows, that invasive species may be the savings of our descendants," Kestrel said. "Look at what humans have done."

"As much as we have changed the ecosystem already, those new creatures may be the best for the new environments," Livia said.

Yanda lowered her gun. "Perhaps you're right. Is there any way we can take one vehicle and go to the Phoenix Zoo?" She led the group to the gun shop and unlocked the door.

Kestrel fingered some of the ammunition, and nodded to the soldiers. "You know, that might solve one of our problems. The Phoenix Zoo and the Wildlife World Zoo are about the same distance. Problem is, the Phoenix Zoo is in the wrong direction. Will you release the animals?"

"The most dangerous can be used as food for other animals, or killed. Most can be released. Some of the snakes cannot," Yanda said.

"How much can we take?" Kestrel asked.

Yanda drew a deep breath. "It's my sister's store. I think she's died in the evacuation. Let's take it all. Don't want raiders to find it."

"And a trailer behind the store." Another woman grabbed a box of ammunition.

"We'll hook the trailer to Blair's vehicle. She'll load it with everything she can. And take you, and your group, back to the Phoenix Zoo." Kestrel dumped some long boxes in Corbo's outstretched arms.

It didn't take long to fill the vehicles with the remaining weapons and ammunition. Blair, the women, and their guns were on the road to their own destination.

Livia was confident that none of the animals they had already released would become invasive, and destroy the delicate desert ecosystem. Without humans to hunt them, they could thrive and create a new ecosystem.

"We'd like to be at the reactor by nightfall." Kestrel turned west. "The next part is tricky. Lake Pleasant has a drainage ditch we have to cross. I've no idea how much damage has occurred there. We can make it across as long as the damage is minimal. Typically, there's little visible water, because of a canal under the bridge."

They reached the bridge, and stopped. Water gushed under the supports, and lapped the roadway.

"That last quake." Corbo held Livia close.

"Can you do what Alex did?"

Corbo's face paled. "I can try. Is water on the road?"

"Not much," Kestrel said. "I'm not sure about this."

"Well, if he can't, I will." Livia pulled away from Corbo.

"We'll go together. Let's take our crutches. They'll have to do."

"Let us cross. Then one vehicle at a time." She closed the door.

Her heart sank. The Wildlife World animals depended on her. Livia stepped forward. One step, and then another. Water sloshed and slid through the canyon with a roar that blocked out all normal sound. Her vision and hearing tunneled. She took Corbo's hand, and they inched across, tapping the road ahead with their crutches.

The road seemed solid enough. As they reached the other side, she hugged Corbo close. They had made it. Now, if the vehicles could make it across, everything would be fine. Otherwise, Livia and Corbo would be left alone, with no shelter, little food, or water, and hobbled on crutches.

She waved to Kestrel.

Valarie and Harvey made the crossing next.

The soldiers crept across in single file, carrying as much equipment as each dared.

Livia and Corbo hobbled down the road with Valarie and Harvey beside them. If the bridge failed, they wanted to be well out of the way.

A few hundred feet away, they leaned on the crutches. Livia leaned her head on Corbo's shoulder, trying not to add weight to him.

The first vehicle inched across.

Waves sloshed the bridge rails.

Kestrel reached their side of the river.

Livia breathed a sigh of relief.

He kept going beyond them for another few hundred feet.

The second vehicle began the slow trek across the bridge.

Another wave sloshed across the roadway, and hydroplaned the vehicle a few feet to the left.

Livia took a deep breath and grasped her chest, the crutch falling to the ground unnoticed. She didn't want to watch anyone die.

The bridge supports creaked and cracked.

The driver on the bridge kicked the gas into overdrive.

Livia, Corbo, and the soldiers jumped back, off the road.

Kestrel sped further out of the way.

The bridge swayed, and cracked.

Livia didn't look up.

Corbo grabbed her. "He made it."

The east end of the bridge pointed down, the west end rose up in the sky. The rear wheels of the second vehicle had made the crossing, before it lifted. The rear bumper bore the scratches to show how close devastation had been.

Corbo covered her head as the remaining structure crumbled into the rushing waves.

Livia's tears slipped down her cheek, to join the river at her feet. Sad for the loss of going back, and thankful they survived the crossing.

Corbo helped her up, and they hurried to the vehicle.

"We'll have to go back another way. If we make it back," Kestrel said.

Livia snuggled close to Corbo. They were both safe. Now, on to save the animals, and find Corbo's dad. Then, they would build a new life together, with a baby to join them soon.

There were many more, much shorter, bridges. The water level deceased. Debris had not pulled the highway sections down, since the shorter bridge supports were all on land.

"Almost there," Kestrel said. "If you two don't mind, we'll drop you off at the entrance gate with one or two soldiers."

"What?" Livia said. "You're going to leave us here? I thought Corporal Eagle Eye wanted you to stay with us."

"We won't be far away. We need fuel, and food. A base is a few blocks from Wildlife World. We'll be back in an hour or so. John and Nan, know the way."

Kestrel stopped the vehicle, and let Corbo help Livia out.

John, Nan, Valarie, and Harvey also came. They all carried several weapons.

"Be back soon." Kestrel drove off.

"Don't worry. It's not as bad as it sounds," John said. "Don't shoot unless you have to."

The entrance gate was shut.

Livia walked forward and pushed the gate. It opened.

Harvey stepped up beside her. "I've been here. I know where many of the animals are, or were. Not sure where the keepers might be staying."

He pushed ahead of her, with Valarie by his side.

Livia leaned on her crutches.

"Come on. We'll start at the back. Open gates, and use the zebras to herd the animals." Valarie ran ahead.

"No, don't!" An unknown male voice screamed. "You can't let them free."

John stepped. "Sorry. Little hope of saving them in cages."

"My partner died trying to save the penguins. I can't let more animals die."

"We'll do what we can. We already released one park, and the Phoenix Zoo is releasing tonight too," Livia said.

"How will the grazers survive?"

"Release them now, and the tigers and other meat eaters later tonight," Corbo said. "It'll work. Someday, the southwest will be covered in giraffes, zebra, and lions."

The three herd groups would find each other. For a few generations, the species would stay together for protection. It might be as beautiful as the ancient bison herds were imagined to be. Someday. Livia wouldn't live to see it. It would take a few human generations for the animals to repopulate the land. Especially with hungry humans around.

"I don't like the idea."

Nan held her gun halfway to her waist. "General's orders. Release the animals and they might survive. In cages with no supplies, they will die."

"I'm Quinn. We'll do what we can." He lifted his hands and turned away from them muttering.

"Come on. Let's go." Valarie said.

"Let me grab the keys." Quinn hurried into the building on the left. He was back in a moment with a box.

"All the keys we'll need." He closed his eyes a moment. "I can't believe I'm doing this. The animals are out of food and water. So am I." His hands shook until the keys in the box rattled.

"You sure there's no hope of the power and supplies coming back in time?"

John put his hand on the man's shoulder. "There may not be any more power. There won't be any more supplies, for a long time. Hurry, we can't stay long. The heat of the day is almost here."

The man closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "Let's go. Release the addax and onyx first. They can help herd and protect the others."

Quinn glanced at Livia and Corbo with their crutches. "Can you two walk far?"

"We are both hurt. We will do what we can." Livia said.

"I think the golf cart has enough gas for one more time around the park. Take it." Quinn tossed a key at her.

"Which one?" Livia tried to catch up to him.

"Try that one, closest to the door."

Livia jumped in, turned the key, and it started. She drove to Corbo and he jumped in.

"Here take these keys and a map. Release the giraffe, and onyx, and work them to the gate as we come around the other side." Quinn handed a map and keys to Corbo.

Livia spun the vehicle around, and drove in the direction the man pointed.

The giraffe enclosure was first. "The animals are hungry enough, they'll bolt easy." She glanced at the map. "We'll free the onyx first."

At that gate, she shifted through the keys, trying each one, until she finally found the correct one. All the animals waited close to the gate. She picked up a small rock and threw it behind them. Wild onyx raced out of the gate, and down the pathway.

Livia hobbled across the walkway to release the camels and gazelle.

Corbo stayed behind, blocking the path.

They hurried through releasing animals, taking turns, so neither walked too much. Livia patted a few as they walked out the gates past her. Soon, the loose grazers had all wondered into the kangaroo exhibit, where stinky, scum covered water evaporated in the midday sun.

"That's all, I think. The water is nasty. We haven't had running water for over a week," Quinn said.

Valarie, Stanley, and John arrived with the last few herd animals.

"Let's leave them here. We have to be sure the fish won't suffer anymore. The penguins are already dead, and I'm not sure about the sharks."

"Can I go?" Livia asked.

The man took a deep breath. "You won't like it. Those buildings reek of dying, rotting flesh."

"Maybe we can save something."

"Maybe." Quinn jumped up in the cart with them, and pointed where to go.

Quinn opened the building doors. What should have a blast of ice cold air, was instead a noxious fermenting furnace of rotting fish scales.

Livia coughed, and covered her mouth and nose.

"Not much can be saved here. We've already fed many of our fish to the sharks. I don't want them to suffer. I wish there was a way to save them."

Livia walked to the tank.

The sharks were dull, fins down, and barely alive. Their water was already low, stinky, dark, not clean or clear at all.

"A gun won't pierce their hide," Quinn said. "I don't know an easy way to put them out of their misery. Eventually, they'll suffocate."

Few animals lived inside the buildings. They were able to release a few turtles and tortoises. If they didn't live, they would become food for hungry animals. At least their lives would not be wasted.

Livia found one tank that had cavefish in it, and they were alive.

"Can we take them?"

"I can find a bucket, if you have a place in mind," Quinn said.

"Anywhere other than here. Maybe we can set them free in that canal, and they can reach a cave."

He laughed and ran for a bucket. "They don't take much water."

She caught as many as she could, and they hurried along the row of tanks.

Soon, they were back at the kangaroo center, with the cave fish bucket.

"Livia, you take the cart and drive it around the walkabout. We'll block access, and force the animals out the main gate," Quinn said.

Livia waited until everyone was in place. She drove slowly at first. Then realized the animals were used to the slow moving vehicles. She stopped, and pulled a red shirt from her backpack. All she had to do was convince a few animals to move toward the gate, and the rest would follow.

She hit the gas, held on with one hand, screamed, and waved the shirt.

At first, the animals stared at her.

She didn't stop.

They turned, as if all one animal, and fled for the gate. Zebras, onyx, camels, deer, and many other grazers from around the world unleashed west of Phoenix.

Livia stopped at the gate, panting.

The engine sputtered and died, as the grazers raced across the road, and out of sight amid the desert fauna.

Chapter 36

WildLife World Zoo to Palo Verde to Avondale Arizona

Corbo ran to Livia and helped her off the golf cart.

"Are you okay?"

"Tired is all," Livia said.

"I imagine. Kestrel should be back soon. Everyone's getting ready to go."

"We can't forget the cats," Quinn said.

"You and I will stay here and let them out in hour so," John said. "Then we'll walk to the base. It's a few blocks away."

"We can check on the horse farm to," Quinn said.

"Good idea. Let's go rest in the shade." John said.

"We'll stay here too," Valarie said. "The horses are close?"

"Half-way to the base," Quinn said. "Come on."

Valarie and Harvey followed the two men back to the shade of the broken refreshment stand.

Within minutes Kestrel was back to pick them up. There were now four vehicles.

"Glad you made it safe," Corbo said. "How rough is this trip to the reactor going to be?"

"Not sure. One reason for reinforcements."

"At least we are completed two assignments," Corbo said.

"It's about forty miles to the nuclear reactor. We should be able to make it an hour or two," Kestrel said.

"I should hope so," Corbo said. "How much further to Florence?"

"About a hundred miles. Florence is our last step. Corbo Eagle Eye wants us to finish up there, and then head back to base. If there are any roads left."

Corbo helped Livia in. "I want to find my dad. I didn't even know about him until a few months ago."

"We'll take you there as soon as we can. It'll be tomorrow before you can search, at the earliest."

For two hours, they dodged potholes, and broken down vehicles. By midafternoon, the sun beat down relentlessly. Wildlife sightings had been limited to a few coyotes.

Kestrel turned off the interstate, and drove down a long stretch of road. The three massive building complexes, and the cooling pools of water, waited for them behind high security gates. No smoke rose from the reactors. A whiff of a cloud rested off to the west.

As turbulent as the Earth was, a nuclear reactor was not the place to be. Too many things could go wrong. It would be better to be searching for his father, rather than visiting here.

The towering gates were open. Tensions were high, as Kestrel entered the complex, followed by the other three vehicles.

Kestrel stopped the vehicle near one of the buildings.

The first building was locked tight.

Corbo leaned on his crutches.

They marched to the second building. The dusty steps showed no sign of footprints. Kestrel turned back once he verified the door was locked.

The cloud in the west darkened, and grew.

"The engineers that should be here could be anywhere. It spans miles." Kestrel glanced back at the cloud, and the soldiers. "Go ahead and split up. Go in pairs in case you find somebody. Don't go inside the buildings. If a door will open, shout." He motioned to Corbo and Livia.

The group searched for an hour. It felt much longer. Clouds thickened, darkened, and crept nearer. Near one of the cooling ponds, they found the small group of engineers.

"Hello there," Kestrel said. "Is everything okay?"

"Sure is. We hoped someone would come for us soon. Most of the line is down, so there is no need to keep producing electricity. It wouldn't do much good. Plus, we can't move supplies in, or out. It will become dangerous any day," the engineer said.

"I thought this was the safest nuclear reactor in the world." Kestrel hurried ahead of the oncoming clouds.

"It is. We have to shut it down because we are almost out of supplies, and can't reach our supply lines. It may be years before will be able to start it back up. We have to be sure it's safe until then."

"If you leave, what if no one ever comes back?" Corbo asked.

The engineers glanced at each other. "The statistics say it would be safe. After all the earthquakes rarely damage this area."

"What about wild animals, or wild weather?" Livia asked.

"Eventually, anything's possible. Most humans won't be around by then. Or, maybe they'll already be using it, or found a safety solution. It's deactivated, for now."

The man might be right about it being safe in their lifetime. A few lifetimes from now, who knew. Most of the soldiers had gathered back at the vehicles and waited on them.

It was almost evening. They began the last hundred-mile journey to Florence, to find his father. If the clouds in the distance didn't bring bad weather, they might make the town by nightfall.

The first drops of rain hit the ground in front of them.

Corbo helped Livia into the vehicle.

Two of the engineers followed.

The clouds were overhead and ice-cold rain poured heavily down.

He jumped in and pulled the door shut behind him.

Kestrel pulled the vehicle back onto the road. "I don't know if I can outrun those storms. Potholes rule the road."

Corbo grunted. Kestrel was right. It was scary. Storms in Arizona that came unexpected like this never turned out good. Rain was valued, although a flash flood downpour could turn deadly in a hurry.

Drops pounded down. The sky grew darker. Their vehicle bounced through the holes, out the open gate, and back onto the main road.

"We are going west, and then we'll head south where we'll meet the main interstate," Kestrel said. "If we make it that far."

Corbo pulled Livia close. This vehicle was strong enough to keep them safe and dry.

"I think we're staying even with the clouds," one soldier said. "Perhaps we should stop, and let the clouds go past us. Kestrel would see the road better."

"You must be from somewhere far north, or west." Kestrel swerved to miss another pothole.

"Sure am. I wouldn't drive in this. I'd wait it out."

Kestrel laughed. "Not here you don't."

He swerved, this time narrowly avoiding a fallen road sign.

The rain beating against the windshield stopped.

"Oh good," the man said. "The sun will come back out soon."

Corbo grabbed Livia and held her close.

Kestrel slammed on the brakes. "Out now."

Corbo opened the door, dragged Livia out, and glanced behind them.

The air was calm. The wind stopped. Rain pattered on ahead of them, into the distance.

Behind them, a funnel cloud reached for the ground.

"What's wrong?" The northerner asked, grumbling as he stepped out of the vehicle.

Corbo pointed.

"A wispy cloud. Enough to give a little shower. Nothing like what we drove through."

Corbo groaned.

Other soldiers piled out and dragged the man along. They searched for a safe place to hide. There was a board on the ground. Only one. They ran to it, and pushed Livia in the center. Everyone else packed in around her, and pulled the edges down.

The wind whipped and moaned. Debris was picked up, and thrown in the air. Rocks and other small objects pounded the plywood board. Roaring winds whistled louder.

Keeping Livia safe was all that mattered. Corbo put his hands over her head so that nothing could break through the board. She had done so much for him, and stood beside him even though she knew his past, and what his future should hold.

She had done everything that he would want from a potential wife. It had been selfishness to think that he did not want to marry her. She deserved a better companion, one who truly understood her and her culture. Especially since he had no culture.

She had stayed with him through everything, leaving her parents behind. If he had made her happy this long, perhaps he should stay with her, and make her happy. Especially now that a baby was on the way.

The board bounced in the soldier's grasp.

Wind whipped underneath. It splashed rain, mud, and small creatures into their faces.

The board snapped in the middle right over Livia's head.

She screamed.

He grabbed her, and pulled her under his body. Then, he grabbed the remains of the board and tried to hold it steady over his head.

The roar moved on. The wind began to calm.

Corbo took a deep breath.

A mouse ran from under his face. Bugs scurried about the ground, searching for a safe place to hide.

Corbo lifted the remains of the board off Livia.

"Is everyone okay?" Kestrel asked.

There were a few grunts, and groans. No one was visibly in serious condition. One man had a gash on his face from trying to hold the board steady. Another had scratched up hands.

A few from one of the other vehicles had not been able to crawl under the board. They had huddled together, soaked, muddy, and safe.

The vehicles had stayed on the road through the tornado. The winds had turned one around, and it faced west now.

"I'll go check the condition of the vehicles," Kestrel said. "Be sure no one's hurt. Try to rake some of the mud off."

A few of the soldiers laughed. Trying to clean up would be difficult even if they did have warm water and clean clothes. People stood up, and moved around, checking for broken bones. Before long, they were all back in the vehicles and traveling.

Seventy-five more miles to travel to Florence, and Corbo's hope of finding his father.

They hadn't been on the road long, when one of the vehicles behind them signaled with their headlights.

"Kestrel, they're blinking. I don't know what's wrong." Corbo turned around to look.

Kestrel pulled over.

Corbo got out with him, and walked to the vehicle behind.

The third vehicle had stopped about a half mile back. The driver and the engineers from the power plant jogged toward them. "Everything seemed fine at first. The gas ran out. I guess a rock bounced up and hit the gas tank. Now what do we do? All four vehicles are already crowded."

"We can't leave anyone behind," Kestrel said.

"I don't see any vehicles we can ask the owners for, or even any owners." The second vehicle's driver pointed at the empty road.

"Our mission requires all of us to arrive there at the same time. We will have to try to repair, or replace the gas tank, and find fuel anywhere we can."

"At least there's houses and businesses around," Corbo said. "There may be some hidden vehicles in garages with gas in their tanks."

"We'll stay and work on removing gas tank," one of the engineers said. "Go on. Be back soon."

Corbo glanced at the sky. It was clear. The early evening sun lengthened the shadows, and the mud was drying up.

"I'll take Livia. We will be that way." Corbo pointed to the left where there were several car lots. "We'll take the one on the far right."

"Take a gun," the driver said.

"Probably need scorpion spray," Corbo said.

Corbo took Livia's hand and helped her out of the vehicle. "Time to find an empty gas tank, and a full one."

She laughed. The sound sent a tingle up Corbo's spine.

"We'll manage. Let's go." She grabbed the crutches.

"Wish we could take one of these, rather than do all the dirty work. Not sure how the retrofit will work."

"They won't be interchangeable," the soldier with them said. "And if it weren't for the engineers, we'd have to take one as is. We need the reinforced steel and windows of the vehicles we came in."

They found a hummer behind one of the buildings surrounded by RV's. It didn't have a "for sale" sign.

Corbo waved for the other soldiers to come over and help. It would take a lot of sweat on such a hot day to find, and remove the tank.

"I think we'll have to break into a building," Livia said. "One at least will have a drink machine. They'll be okay, if they haven't exploded from the heat."

Corbo covered his eyes and gazed at all of the various buildings in the area. "That one looks likely." He pointed to the nearest garage building. Several vehicles had been abandoned on lifts.

"Doesn't look like anyone else has broken in. Let's try it." He hurried over to the building.

The hummer's alarm went off.

A rock from the tornado as it passed through could have broken the shattered window in the building. The door would be open if raiders had broken in. Corbo stuck his head in the broken window. His body blocked the sunlight from the window.

"I don't see anything. I'll have to climb to in."

He pulled himself through, and searched for the drink machine.

"You wait. I'll bring them to you. Keep the crutches ready if you need them."

The machine would need a key to open it. A room beside the machine was unlocked. Plenty of drinks. He carried a box of water to the bay door. It took a few minutes to open it.

"Here Livia. There's plenty more."

She walked in. "How about we check those vehicles?"

"They're up too high."

"I can climb up there." She grabbed a ladder by an inner door.

She leaned it against the first truck and climbed up, gently testing her ankle on each step.

"A little here. Not enough to be worth the trouble."

She climbed back down, and moved to the second. "More. Have to keep trying."

She moved the ladder to the third vehicle, a large car. "You know. I don't wanna climb up again. There has to be some gas cans around here somewhere."

There was a shout outside, and something heavy hit the ground with a thud.

Corbo ran out into the sunshine, shading his eyes.

Chapter 37

Kingfisher, across Cimarron River to Dover, Vance Air Force Base, Enid Oklahoma

The nurses and doctors cried as they covered up Kelly's body.

Amber helped move the loose dirt to cover her body. Not much protection against wild and hungry animals. Tam and Joe's father and grandmother had had less.

Alex sat on the helipad with Tam, Joe, and Ellie. Something about his profile in the sun, with clouds streaming overhead touched a chord in her heart. Her hands and legs trembled.

One of the nurses, Tracey, yelled.

The ground shook more than her hands.

Hospital walls wobbled. They may have been built to the codes of the time. To code walls couldn't withstand repeated attacks, as the earth split and moved, without time, opportunity, or supplies to repair the last year's cracks in the foundation, walls, and roof.

Alex shouted something she couldn't hear.

The wall closest to the burial pit groaned and decorative bricks shattered and scattered at the base. Windows cracked.

She grabbed Tracey's hand. "Come on. We have to go." Amber pulled the hand of the doctor who had saved Alex.

Stanley stumbled beside her, and almost fell into the open pit as the ground lifted near them.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him back from the brink.

Gradually, they all stumbled to Alex and the helipad.

The ground stopped shifting.

Amber glanced back at the hospital.

One of the walls crashed to the ground, billowing up clouds of debris. Kelly was fully buried now.

They all coughed and sputtered.

Rubble rained onto the ground around them. No large wild animal would easily uncover her body now.

Amber grabbed Tam and Joe, pulled them into her arms. She sat beside Alex, and wept softly.

The noise died away.

The breeze from the collapse wafted away the finer particles, far to the east.

Tam wiggled free, and pulled on Joe's arm.

"Come on, we have to find somewhere safe. Is anywhere safe?"

"I don't know anymore. We will find somewhere." Amber touched their hands.

"We have to go," Tracey said. "My son and grandchildren. I need to see them and be sure they are safe."

The five people abandoned at the hospital were struggling to hold the thin fabric of their lives together. Five adults and no children were not enough people to build a new community. Once she and Alex left, they would be even more alone with no food or shelter.

"We'll take you with us. Where are your son and grandson?"

"In Dover. It's not far. I should have been home days ago." Tracey cried.

The other nurse and two doctors tried to comfort her.

"What about the rest of you? Where are your families?" Alex asked.

"They evacuated. No one has heard from the tent town the evacuees were sent to." One of the doctors sat down next to the pit.

The evacuees had flooded north and east. Camp cities had been hastily set up, often in harvested cornfields. Food was scarce. Communication almost nonexistent. Doctors had no medicine to treat outbreaks that were bound to occur without proper sewage treatment centers.

"They didn't want you for the camps?"

"Nope. They needed us here, for the prisons in the state. We ran out of fuel weeks ago." The doctor stared at the crumbled wall. "What little food we had is now buried."

" We need one person to go in and gather as many of our belongings as we can. If it's safe," Amber said.

"I think the wing we stayed in last night is mostly intact; for the moment. I'll go. Everyone else, go on to the vehicles." Stanley turned and stared at the ruins of the hospital.

One of the doctors reached out and put his hand on his shoulder. "I'll go to. I'll grab all the medicine I can. There's a few cans of baby formula in the room Tracey stayed in."

Before long, they were all in the vehicles with as many of their belongings as they had been able to save. Tam and Joe were bundled under their quilt, still damp in spots. Baby Ellie nestled in Amber's arms.

Stanley pulled out of the parking lot, and turned north. The building that had looked so grand and safe yesterday, was now a wasteland of rubble and steel. Parts of the roof had fallen. Debris scattered about the grounds. Dust blanketed everything in sight.

Amber hugged little Ellie; wrapped in the less than clean blanket. No diapers, little formula, and no memory of her mother.

Tam reached over and patted the infant's head.

"She'll be fine. Too bad we don't have that colt and its mother."

Tam had a point. The mother horse would have been perfect.

The fractured road wasn't too bad. They passed plenty of abandoned buildings, many partially flattened. Potholes, and even a few road shifts were navigable in the high profile vehicles.

"We'll be reaching the Cimarron River in a few minutes," the nurse said. "Its water table has been known to drop below the sandy river bed, that's why there are several ponds beyond the river bend."

Amber leaned forward as they reached the bridge.

"I'll go check," Alex said.

Amber kissed his cheek as he pulled away.

Alex walked out to the bridge. He took each step carefully. He didn't appear to be wavering in the heat of the day. Once he reached the other side, he waved them forward. To be safe, one vehicle at a time would cross. When all three vehicles were across, Alex opened the door, and slid in beside her.

"Safe. No sign of damage here. That worries me."

"Why?"

"Wait. We are going to the Air Force base after we drop off the nurses and doctors in Dover. We'll see if they have heard anything."

Amber didn't need one more thing to worry about.

Ellie burst into tears.

Tam reached over, patted her. "Hush baby. You can eat soon."

Ellie's eyes watched Tam, as she made hand motions above her face.

"A few more miles," Tracey said.

The ponds on either side of the road were a deep dark color with no vegetation visible nearby. Anything could be hiding there. With the sun at almost midday, their color was like thunderclouds on the ground.

Stanley slowed as they reached the buildings of town.

The buildings appeared structurally sound, from a distance. No looters had struck.

"A few people stayed behind near here, on the farms, like my son and grandchildren," Tracey said.

Amber smiled at the excitement in her voice, and inability to sit still. Tracey was glad to be going home, something Amber could never do. Her home had been destroyed by an earthquake. And even if she could make it there, her mother and Karen wouldn't be there.

A tear dropped on baby Ellie.

Perhaps she should marry Alex. It would make him happy. Love was a mysterious thing. She didn't want to be bound if their lives changed. How would it affect Tam, Joe, and Ellie?

"There, to the left. I can see the house."

A house, with several other structures clustered around it. It reminded her of Dena's ranch.

"A few neighbors sent their horses and cows to join our cow herd when they left. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Sure." It was beautiful. The type of home she wanted for Tam, Joe, and now Ellie.

Several adults and children crowded around the vehicles, and helped them out. Food cooked on an open fire near the main house. Before long, the group joined the families for a meal.

"The local houses have been abandoned," Tracey's son said. "Anyone else want to stay? I have the keys, and am supposed to watch them."

After a meal, the other doctors and nurse decided to stay in Dover.

"What about the baby?"

Amber thought about letting Ellie stay here. She had been much happier after a bottle of formula with a little fresh cow's milk in it. She couldn't give her up, not now. After all, she had promised Alex he could have her.

"You can't take a cow with you, or milk. What will you do?"

"I don't want to give her up either. We can't feed her." Alex put his arm around her shoulder.

"We have a few cans of formula. That will feed her until we reach someplace with cows."

He smiled and clapped Alex on the back. "Your young wife trusts too much. One of my neighbors ran a convenience store. Maybe they have some. I'll go check." He took one of the horses from the nearest corral.

Amber smiled up at Alex as they waited. There was no point in arguing that they weren't married, and never would be. She rested in the shade of the porch.

Ellie cooed on her lap.

The doctors pulled up water from the well for their trip.

Tracey's son returned with a burlap sack to Alex. "Formula and water. You'll need both. Perhaps, in Enid, you can find more."

"Thanks," Amber said. "We delivered this baby, as her mom died. We don't want anything to happen to her."

He laughed. "And what will you do when she grows up, and marries?"

"I don't wanna think about it." Amber stepped into the vehicle. "Besides, by then, she will be grown and able to care for herself, if we raised her right. We'll be proud to let her be the adult she is meant to be."

"Sure you will. Be safe." Tracey's son hugged his wife, and mother close. Several children played nearby. Other adults showed the newcomers around the farm.

"Thirty miles," Stanley said. "Let's hope we make it by dark."

Amber settled herself, Tam, Joe, and little Ellie in. The children would nap.

Alex wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and kissed her neck, sending shivers up and down her spine.

She turned to him and smiled. "Maybe later."

His face lit up, and he snuggled tighter against her.

The trip was monotonous. Bouncing over holes pushed the blanket onto the floor from time to time. Amber tugged it back up, and tucked the children in. Although the weather was hot, they drew comfort from the quilt sewn by their now dead grandmother.

As her hands smoothed the blanket resting on Tam's shoulders, a comfort and warmth caressed her. Her grandmother watched

over her, as theirs did over them. A tear slipped down her cheek. It splashed on a strawberry in the patterned fabric.

"Almost there," Monty said. "No idea what we'll find."

Amber softly shook Tam and Joe awake.

They sat up, rubbed their eyes, and looked out the window.

"Can we stay here a while? Tired of traveling," Joe said.

"No idea. We were supposed to go back to the other base from here. The road back is closed."

Stanley pulled to a stop in front of an imposing looking building. "Alex, Amber, you and the kids wait here, or under the shade anyway."

Amber handed Ellie to Alex. She pulled her pack onto her back, and helped Tam and Joe out. They sat on the curb and waited.

In a few minutes, Monty returned, pale in the heat of late day. "Alex, we need you. It's not good."

Alex glanced at Amber. "Be back soon."

He kissed Ellie, and handed her back to Amber. Alex patted Tam and Joe on the head before following Monty into the building.

Joe and Tam played with pebbles on the ground, and Ellie cried, ready for another feeding.

The children had come to mean a lot to her. Now, she felt left out of adult conversations, because of them. She had reached adulthood, and acceptance into the scientific community, only a month ago. And now, was being encouraged to leave it behind, to be a mother herself. This wouldn't do. Her mother would never have let other people leave her out of the scientific community.

She stood up, and focused on the building. "Come on Tam and Joe. Whatever they are saying matters to us as much as them. No point in shielding you now."

Tam picked up the quilt, and Joe followed her to the door.

Amber ushered them in, glancing back at the sky as she did so.

A spot of silver was visible, maybe a cloud, above the horizon. Maybe a water tower that hadn't toppled. Or, maybe not.

A tingle went up her spine.

Chapter 38

Vance Air Force Base, Enid Oklahoma to Webb City, Oklahoma

Alex walked into the building. Amber would follow soon. In fact, he barely believed she had waited at all.

"Anything the kids shouldn't know?"

"We have plenty of time," Monty said.

"Now." Alex stopped, and glanced back at the door.

Monty shuffled his boot on the dirty floor. "Few communications. Everything is down. We have access to satellite here." He looked up at Alex.

"Your dad and Dr. Evan have bad news at Yellowstone."

The door creaked open. Tam and Joe ran down the hall.

Alex sank to the floor, and pulled Tam and Joe into his arms. "How soon?"

Monty glanced at Amber. "Don't know. I'll see if someone can watch the kids."

"They aren't leaving us. No more than ten feet away. I promised them," Amber said.

"They'll be in the way, make noise, ask questions, and not understand." A man stepped into the hallway.

Amber touched their shoulders. "I know you've heard it all before. Not these two. They've seen enough."

"Exactly. Enough. No more." The man rocked on his heels and blocked the hallway.

A woman stepped out of the room behind him. "They act clam enough. I'll keep them on one side of the room while you update these scientists and soldiers. Their mother can see them, and they can see her. Okay?"

The man grunted. "Carly, keep them by the door."

Alex and Amber followed him into the large room.

Carly closed the door behind them. "Sorry, Master Sergeant Griff is preoccupied at the moment. Go on." She waved toward the equipment on the far side of the room.

The woman sat down on her knee, reached for Tam and Joe. "Now, tell me your names, and all about you."

Tam placed the quilt on the floor, sat down. "I don't want to talk. I want to draw."

"Okay," Carly said.

"I'll be nearby," Amber touched her shoulder.

"I'll watch Ellie too. I took care of Joe. Gramma's quilt will make a good nest."

Amber sat beside Tam to lay Ellie beside her. "You come to me if you need me."

Tam nodded.

Joe pulled a few small toy figures out of his backpack, and dropped them on the concrete floor.

Alex took Amber's hand, and they walked to where the men and women were gathered around Master Sergeant Griff.

"It's not good. Too many disturbances."

"Yellowstone? I thought they said it was safe, and wouldn't blow."

Master Sergeant Griff gazed around the group. "It was. The recent disturbances have been too much."

"Actually," Alex said. "An eruption now may be a good thing. It won't have near the strength or power as if it had finished building up steam underneath."

"That is what your dad said. We will call him in a few minutes. He'll want to know you are safe, before." The Master Sergeant's words trailed off.

"Before what?" Alex asked.

"Better let him explain. By the way, Corporal Puma called a bit ago as well. He has another mission for you and Amber."

Master Sergeant Griff marched to a complex array of equipment. Within minutes, he had the call placed to Colorado.

Speaking to his dad. So many times they had talked by radio when his dad had been in a remote location. Then, Alex had always been safe at home, or with Tom and his mom. In some ways, now felt little different. Except, Tom, Karen, and Tom's mom, were with his dad at the location of the impending eruption. If Yellowstone did blow, they might need to be further away, if there was time.

"Alex, here you go. Putting it on speaker."

Alex took the microphone. "Dad, how are you?"

"I'm fine. In the thick of things, as usual. Are you safe?"

"Amber and I are fine. We have rescued three children. Hope you can see them soon."

"I won't. Dr. Evan and I. We are sending Tom and Karen to meet you. Then." Noise in the background cut his dad's voice off.

"Dad, what is it?"

"The continental shelf has shifted too much. When Yellowstone erupts, it'll cover at least half the Mesa Falls ash bed."

Most of the evacuation tent cities were in that area. "Dad?"

"Be a good father. Take care of Amber, and those children. Tom and Karen will join you."

Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Dad, come with them."

"I can't. This is the chance of a lifetime. I'll leave a record. Maybe your grandchildren will find it buried in the ash."

"Dad no!"

"It'll fulfill my life. I'm proud of you."

The machine crackled.

Amber grabbed his arm.

"Alex?" Dr. Evan's voice sounded clear.

"Here." Alex mumbled through the tears.

"We can't save the tent cities. No transportation, no fuel, and disease is running rampant. It would cause a panic. Better to let those who are strong enough survive."

"I don't want you and dad to die."

"That's always been the risk we took Alex. One reason I never married. One reason your dad is like he is, so distant. He is proud of you."

More static.

Amber snatched the microphone as it slipped from his hand.

He cried on her shoulder.

Master Sergeant Griff came over to him and stood in front of him. "You okay?"

"I will be. I don't want him to die. He will if he goes there now." Alex's voice thickened.

"He's doing his job. And maybe, just maybe, this is how he wants his life to end. It's a passion. Sometimes, our passions lead us to do things no one will ever understand."

"We suggested the evacuation," Amber said. "Does that mean we are guilty for all the deaths?"

Master Sergeant Griff waited a long moment. "No. They had to leave the earthquake zone. And, how many would have died from falling buildings, disease, or looting if they had stayed? In fact, you were right. More are alive at this moment, because no one has anything that others would want to steal. They will die suddenly, not slowly, and in fear for months."

A noise from across the room pulled his attention away a moment. "You didn't tell them where to go. They had to leave the quake, flood, and eruption damaged areas. It was the military who set up the evacuation centers."

Amber wiped away the mingled tears on her cheek.

"Go rest. Our base has to decide what we want to do now."

Alex took Amber's arm and steered her toward the door. They walked down the hall, and found the restrooms. It had been a long day. At least electricity and sewage worked here, for the moment. Whether the power was solar or wind, was unclear.

They walked back, arm in arm. Amber leaned on his shoulder. She straightened up before they went in the door.

"Corporal Puma recommends our base join the people in Dover. There are concerns." He glanced over his head at Alex and Amber.

"Come on, he wants to speak to you as well."

Alex took the phone. "Yes, Corporal?"

"Alex, glad you made it safe. I want you and Amber to go to Webb City. Tulsa Library was attempting to ship their library books to a safer place at Fort Scott. They never made it. We need you to check on it there, and follow their trail. Save what you can. Who knows what, destruction Yellowstone may do. Be quick."

"Okay sir. What then?" Alex said.

"Monty will bring the conveys back here, through Oklahoma City. Let me speak to him now."

"Yes sir."

Monty spoke to Corporal Puma. When finished, he turned to Alex. "We all need the break. It's at least a couple of hours' drive, maybe more, depending on the lake."

"Lake?" Amber asked.

"Kaw Lake. We can either drive over it, or south of it. If the quakes haven't damaged either road."

Alex groaned. It would be a long night, and another long drive. His strength was still low from the tear gas. Monty, and several of

the other soldiers, had suffered more from it at the time. It would take a few days to recover.

Morning came, and back on the road. Tam and Joe had to be as tired of traveling as he was. Kids needed to run and play to build up their muscles. Once, he had wanted to travel everywhere. Now, he wanted a place to stay. Preferably with Amber, if she would have him.

He pulled her close, and she rested her head on his shoulder. "A few more days."

Baby Ellie nestled peacefully on her lap.

Seven ghost towns, and four rivers later, they reached Webb City.

Monty didn't know this area well. When they reached Webb City, he stopped the vehicle. The additional vehicles that had joined them, stopped behind him.

"Those hills weren't there before. Volcanoes aren't forming here, are they?"

"Not necessarily," Alex said. "The east North American plate has slid further east and north. It folded the land here. A year ago, I would have been glad to see new mountains in the making."

"We have to find the caravan," Monty said. "Do you think this area will flood?"

"Not if the new hills hold the lake in. The water table will change, and ponds will form in areas that are now lower. It may be a few years though before they hold water year round."

On down the road, four semi-trailers were parked off road, against the trees. No one was in sight.

Monty parked behind the trucks.

"Tam, Joe, you stay close. Be careful of snakes and other creatures," Alex said.

Tam grabbed his hand, holding onto Joe as well.

Amber walked ahead of them, up the driveway on the left side of the road.

A house hid behind trees. Six men rested in the shade from the late morning sun. A drum and a guitar leaned against a tree.

"Hello." Alex walked up. "Are you the truck drivers?"

"Sure. Haven't seen anyone in weeks. Ran out of gas. How did you get here?"

"Didn't you hear our vehicles?"

"Naw. Henny was playing the drums, and Ryan the guitar. We were trying to decide what to do. Food's about ran out here."

Amber pulled Tam and Joe close.

Alex glanced at her.

She walked behind the trees with the children, holding Ellie even closer.

If Amber avoided them, it wasn't good. Of course, six men alone for weeks. Not a good thing.

Monty walked up. "Have you taken care of the cargo? We are supposed to try store the collection. Then send you to somewhere there are people."

"Aren't many left are there?"

"Not many," Monty said.

"We haven't done much. Had to break into the house to eat and sleep. Who's the woman?"

"She is this man's wife," Monty said.

Alex hadn't argued the point before, and wasn't about to now. "Stay away from her, and the children."

The men laughed. "Hey, we have to ask."

Alex had a feeling he forgot to add, "at least for now." His spine tingled.

Monty glanced at Alex, and then back the men. "Go ahead. Pack your things. We'll send you on the first vehicle out. It leaves in five minutes. Go."

The men jumped up and gathered their bags, drum, and guitar. "We brought everything with us. No point in leaving things in the truck."

The driver patted his weapon. "Well, walk on to the road. I'll point out the vehicle, and three men who will drive you to safety."

Alex waited. More men, desperate men, might be hiding behind the house.

Amber and the children snuck back out from under the trees.

"Stay here. I'm going a bit closer to listen." Alex snuck under the trees. The drivers laughed and one grabbed the shoulders of the other two as they walked to the third military vehicle. That driver took the truck keys from them, and then hurried them in. A few words with the three soldiers, and the vehicle soon travelled south.

Alex sighed with relief.

The second vehicle pulled out and the driver drove north.

Monty hurried back. "It's safer this way. There are some people in Webb City. The other vehicle is going on to check. Those truck drivers won't be back. Now we can find a safe place to hide a library."

There were a lot of the buildings around the house. Most, not in the best of shape, though not tumbling down at the moment.

"Not here. They can break back in. Let's look on the other side of the road," Amber said.

No suitable place was found after a quick walking search.

The second vehicle returned. Monty hurried to speak to the drive.

Alex and Amber waited in the shade of Monty's vehicle.

Monty waved them over. "He found several people living in Webb City. They seem nice enough. He brought one along."

A tall man stepped out. "Hi, I'm Calvin. We haven't come this far since the hills formed. We are staying close to our homes."

"Are there many of you?" Alex asked.

"Ten adults and a few children. What kind of help can we offer?"

"We are supposed to find a safe place to store Tulsa's library, abandoned here. The drivers ran out of fuel."

Calvin laughed. "The trucks may not be completely empty. The drivers probably stopped when they saw the house and fields. I know the perfect place to take the books."

Monty climbed into the first truck. "It does start. It says it's empty."

"Enough to reach the place I have in mind," Calvin said. "Come on, let's try." He jumped in.

Alex drove the military vehicle Monty had been driving.

Two soldiers drove the other two trucks behind Calvin.

Following Calvin's directions, they reached an adobe building that was on a high area of ground. The first truck sputtered out of fuel as they reached it.

"The adobe building was supposed to be a new hospital. It's plenty strong to hold books." Calvin walked to the doors of the truck. "Come on, let's go."

It took until nightfall to move all the books into the adobe building.

Tam and Joe played with the local kids near the door all day. Ellie slept inside the door out of the sun. Soldiers and the townspeople, trudged by her, loaded with books.

Alex found Amber after his last load in.

She was feeding Ellie, and looking at a book about cultures from around the world. She pointed to the page. "I wonder if these arctic cultures will survive? Some cultures on the brink of extinction will die, and others may revive, if they can find food and shelter."

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. "The modern world may not survive. The ancient world will return with new customs, and new cultures. Hopefully, they won't make our mistakes."

"It wasn't our mistakes that caused this, was it?" Alex caressed her cheek.

"Some. It would have happened someday. We sped it up with drilling, and eroding the environment. It'll be generations before it recovers."

"So, maybe our great grandchildren will know peace." He leaned over to kiss her lips.

"Peace with themselves and the environment, let's hope so."

Amber placed Ellie in the pile of blankets she would sleep in tonight, between Tam and Joe. She leaned forward and kissed Alex.

The kiss sent electricity up and down his spine.

He reached around her waist and she giggled.

"Hey, we're trying to sleep over here," A groggy voice said.

Amber took Alex's hand, grabbed a candle, and they slipped into a quiet corner, surrounded by books.

Chapter 39

Avondale through Phoenix to Army base in Florence, Arizona

Livia grabbed her crutches and stumbled after Corbo.

"That came down easy." One soldier stepped back from the billowing cloud of dust around the hummer.

"Now, getting it back up in the transport vehicle, and filled, won't be so easy," another of the soldiers said. "Let's carry it."

"Need help?" Corbo asked.

"Naw. You all find anything?"

"Drinks. And some fuel."

"I think there's more. I saw a wheelbarrow, and there is a tank in back. Surely they keep some extra fuel on hand." Livia walked back to the building.

"Should need it soon."

Livia explored. The grease and spilled fuel odor was strong. Not safe for the developing baby. Corbo might not know what to look for, so she had to do it. Two would be quicker than one, anyway. If they didn't find fuel, they and the baby, might not survive.

Mouse and rat tracks ran to and from the snack machine. Over in one corner, hid behind some buckets, was a twenty-five-gallon tank. She touched it, and pushed against it. It didn't move.

"Found it."

Corbo came over with the wheelbarrow full of drink bottles. "I'll take these to the vehicles first. Be right back."

Livia took a deep breath. She opened the intake valve to be sure it smelled like gas, and appeared mixed up enough to use. The liquid rose almost to the top of the opening. If the combination was right, and it wasn't mixed with oil, or something else in the shop, it would be enough for the trip.

When Corbo came back, it took both of them to balance the unwieldy rusty tank in the rickety wheelbarrow. Livia grabbed the fuel hoses nearby, and sat them on top. They pushed and pulled the load through the door.

"I'll come back and close it," she said.

"Should we bother?"

"Yes. Gas and oil are dangerous to the creatures. Don't want anything bigger than the rats and mice gnawing in. Besides, the owners may come back some day."

Corbo grunted as they pulled the tank across the embankment. "Should we leave them a letter?"

"No. Don't think so."

"They'll have our fingerprints." Corbo panted from the exertion.

"When people come back, they'll have so much more to worry about. We'll be sure Corporal Eagle Eye has it noted, so they can take care of any problems in the future. After all, we aren't doing it for us. And the military wouldn't be here, if the situation didn't require it."

Corbo glanced at the vehicle. The men were almost finished connecting the gas tank to the vehicle.

"We'll be at Florence soon. The Army needs more soldiers for when people come back. Who knows, they may even use some of the prisoners to help rebuild the town," Livia said.

"I only want to look for one person," Corbo said.

"We'll find your dad. If he's there." Livia reached up and patted his shoulder. "Besides if he isn't there, maybe someone will remember him, or know about him. It's been so many years, it'd be paper documents, instead of computerized."

Corbo laughed. "That would be great. Don't know about you, I'm ready to stay somewhere for a while."

"So am I. Of all the towns we've seen, where would you want to live?"

"Oh, I don't know. How 'bout the solar subdivision near Tuba City?"

"Sounds good. I think we'd fit right in." She laughed. Those strange people needed help learning to live as much as Corbo needed help being legalized.

It wasn't long before the vehicle was ready to be filled with gas. They wheeled the empty tank back to the building.

Livia closed the door and locked it. A piece of leather covered her pregnant belly, and protected it from the jagged glass shards as she crawled out the window. She leaned a board against the broken window to cover the hole, and prevent birds from flying in.

The journey to Florence would be extremely stressful. They would pass through many towns. Wild animals and loose grazing herds of cattle might be crossing the roads, if they could be seen through the billowing dust and ash storms. There had been no shaking for a day or two, and no new signs of volcanic activity north of them. Future eruptions could happen without warning.

She grabbed Corbo's arm. "Give me a gun to. I'll watch as well."

Corbo laughed. "You couldn't shoot, could you?"

"Well, in the Wild West show I used to play in, we shot noise guns. Might not be able to hit anything. I could scare a person, or animal," Livia said.

"Dangerous as always." Corbo said. "All right let me see what I can find."

He shifted through the gun pile on the floor. He pulled out a small flare gun, and handed it to Livia. "This otta do the trick. Similar to what you're used to?"

Livia examined the gun. "Almost the exact same thing. It'll be perfect."

Avondale ended, and Phoenix began without a sign of change. Dust covered the edges of the roadway. The road so far had been clear of debris, at least in the center. Late afternoon shadows stretched from buildings across littered parking lots. A pair of wolves howled as they passed. Other unrecognizable wildlife gamboled far off in the distance.

They reached an area where the houses weren't so close to the road, and could relax, at least a little. The going was slow, as the drivers watched for potholes, and tried to maintain a close distance to each other. They turned back east. Before long, they reached an area with houses on both sides.

"We're going to the Army base tonight," Kestrel said. "Tomorrow we'll take you to where you want to go. Not sure what you will find there, and if the person you are searching for has been, or will be, there."

Livia figured as much, as it was almost dark. It would be too late to visit the immigration detention center.

"How far would it be tomorrow?" Corbo asked.

"About three miles," Kestrel said. "We'll have to check out all the prisons in town, the courthouse, and the immigration detention center. It's no problem for us to drop you off first thing in the

morning. Not sure how many other vehicles will join us in checking on the facilities. They want one vehicle to check each facility each day. That's why we're going. They need us, and more vehicles."

"We appreciate you taking us along," Livia said.

"No problem," Kestrel said. "Hope you find your dad Corbo. I know what it's like to have no memory of a father."

The sun began to sink as they passed through the outskirts of Florence. Before long, they reached the gates of the Army base. Everyone stepped out of the vehicles, taking the guns and ammunition with them. It wouldn't be safe to leave them in the vehicles, even here on the base. Perhaps particularly here, as raiders would come here looking for weapons.

The base soldiers led them to a candlelit dining hall. At least the food, what little there was, was hot.

A commotion interrupted their meal. Scrambled voices were raised. Followed by a silence that spread throughout the room.

Livia stopped chewing to see who had caused the commotion.

Corbo put his hand on her arm.

Within minutes, a uniformed soldier pushed through the door, and the crowd stepped back. All chatter stopped. The people focused on the man who strode through the door.

"Colonel Rogers already ate." A soldier nearby dropped his fork to the floor.

Colonel Rogers walked to the center of the room, and waited until all eyes were on him. He glanced around the room. "We have visitors tonight. Decisions must be made."

He walked over to Livia and Corbo. "Corporal Eagle Eye says you are aware of the geological happenings. We aren't telling the citizens, because there's nothing we, or they, can do."

"I wish we could help," Livia said.

"I've helped Alex and Amber in researching the fault lines and volcanoes in New Mexico," Corbo said.

"Good. The bad news is the recent quakes have caused Yellowstone to grow in an unprecedented manner. We think, since the lava dome is half-full, the eruption shouldn't be as large. However, the disease ridden tent cities don't have time to be re-evacuated."

"They'd have to return to places that are too dangerous to live at the moment," Corbo said. "More people will die if another quake happens, and a building falls on them."

Livia grabbed Corbo's hand and took a deep breath. "So those of us who are here may be all that survive."

Corporal Rogers glanced at her, then around the room. Everyone was quiet, listening, and waiting. "Right now it's the heat of summer. Yellowstone is expected to erupt south of its last cone location. It could be some time in the next week, or month. Winter will come early this year. We may have a real winter here. Snow, and a lot of it, may fall regularly."

The soldier stood, and let that sink in a moment.

"Can you imagine a heavy snow in southern Arizona?" Echoed around the room.

Shock registered on their faces. A confused babble ensued.

Colonel Rogers raised his hand for silence. "We know the results of a large volcanic eruption. Extra-long, hard winters for two, to three years. Shortened growing seasons. Hunger, starvation, and extinction of many plants and animals. No one should panic. You should be safe here. As safe as anywhere." Colonel Rogers looked around the room.

The room filled with loud chatter.

"Will the volcanic eruption stop global warming?"

"What about our families?"

"We sent them to safety or so we thought."

"What about our government?"

"Where are the leaders?"

Colonel Rogers cleared his throat. "Sorry I can't answer your questions right now. I don't have all the answers. Please remain calm."

Livia's head whirled. Her parents could be anywhere in an unknown, unnamed tent city. She had no siblings. All she had left was Corbo, and their unborn child. She gripped his hand, and gazed deep into his face. If Corbo ever left her, she'd be alone with a baby coming.

Chapter 40

Florence, Arizona

"Don't leave me." Livia buried her head on Corbo's shoulder.

He held her close. "I won't leave you. I'll be here."

Corbo barely remembered that night. He stayed awake and thought all night long. Moonlight crept across the walls and ceiling.

The sun peeked into the room they were staying in. They got up bleary-eyed and sleepy. A hot breakfast in the cafeteria might be their last. Food was low here, as were fuel supplies.

Before long, a group of soldiers walked up to him. "You're to go with us today. Another group is going to check out one of the prisons downtown. We're to go straight to the immigration detention center, drop you off, and provide a soldier change."

Corbo grabbed his backpack, and crutches. He stood up and helped Livia up. She was pale and tired. It had been a long few months. Now, all the waiting, and worry should be almost over. Instead, a new journey was about to begin.

She smiled up at him weakly. She took his hand, and soon they were on their way. The last three miles.

The town of Florence was less deserted than many of the towns they had been in. A few people walked here and there.

"Several people stayed here to guard the prisons," Kestrel said. "So Florence has more people than many other nearby towns. Will you stay here?"

"We had talked about going back to northern Arizona," Corbo said. "It might be safer to stay here for a year or two. We can always go north later."

"Good idea." Kestrel turned into a long drive. "Almost there."

Corbo stiffened. The excitement, fear, and the unknown were almost more than he could bear, having known about his father for only a few months. He had no idea what to expect, or if his father even knew that he existed. And now, he was going to meet him. His father would be meeting him and Livia both for the first time, if he could be found.

He took a deep breath as the vehicle came to stop. His hands shook as he opened the door.

Livia squeezed his hand, and looked into his eyes, trying to smile.

"It's not so bad," Kestrel said. "We'll be going with you."

Livia took his hand, and followed the soldiers toward the building.

"Wait." Corbo's voice shook. "I need to find the papers your mom gave me."

He sat down in the middle of the parking lot to paw through his backpack. Down near the bottom, he felt it. The plastic bag he had zipped the precious copies into. They weren't the originals. They'd have to do.

He pulled the pages out of the packet. They were legal documents, maybe copies of copies. The originals would have declared his aunt Anna, uncle Jon, and his mom and dad as legal citizens. On the top page, the one for his dad, dark spots smeared the words. Stains, probably from the tears of Livia's mom when she was a teen, abandoned by the man she had grown to love so quickly.

As he stuffed the pages back in, a strand of the locket's chain, fell into his hand. His hands shook as he opened it. On one side was a man, who resembled him. Dark haired, though lighter skinned than he was. On the other side was a beautiful young woman, much like Livia. It must have been her mother once, before she settled for Livia's dad.

Livia's hand rested on his shoulder, and he glanced up to her. She had tears in her eyes. Her mouth moved. No words came out.

Papers and locket grasped firmly in his hands, he struggled to stand up. Corbo put his arm around her shoulder. This bond between them, and their parents, would keep them together. Something they could both touch that had belonged to both of their parents.

Unlike the homes he had grown up in, the building didn't feel alive, it imposed a heavy presence on the landscape. Sharp corners, and mirrors reflected light into their eyes. It reminded Corbo of a place where people went to die, or a well-lit tomb, like one cemetery building he had hidden in years before, while traveling alone.

There was a good chance his dad had died years ago, either here, or somewhere near.

He walked up to the door.

It swung open and a soldier he didn't know came out. "No entry."

Corbo grimaced. Did this man think he didn't know English well? "We came with the relief crew. I had to stop for my papers." He held them up.

"Sorry young man. Orders and all. Sometimes I forget when I have an overriding order." The man held the door open, and ushered Corbo and Livia in.

"The lady at the counter, Ms. Ida, should be able to help you."

Corbo clutched the papers. He wasn't sure he trusted his voice. It might crack any moment.

Ms. Ida was busy talking to a soldier. Corbo didn't want to intrude, though he was in a hurry to find his father. Perhaps by waiting, she would help him. Maybe even now, she was discussing who his father might be with the soldier.

The sparse waiting room was crowded with cold, plastic chairs scattered about, some in lines, some in circles. In a corner, plastic toddler books, and a few cloth dolls had been dropped as if a toddler had ran from the room moments before. Walls were covered in signs in various languages, many of which Corbo didn't recognize.

"How can I help you?"

Corbo glanced.

Ms. Ida, and the unknown soldier, stared at him and Livia.

At that moment, he wished he could hide behind her. He was twice her size. Livia had done so much for him already. She could negotiate finding his dad as well. Her vocabulary was more formal, and other people respected her more than him, by looks alone.

Livia shoved him forward. "You can do it."

He whimpered and stepped forward, with her at his side. His heels clicked on the tile floor, echoing in the silence.

"Say something," Livia said.

"I'm Corbo. I'm here to find my father."

The woman tapped her fingernails on the counter.

Of course, she knew why he was there. No one else would be allowed in here in the near future without prior approval and knowledge.

"What do you have?" Her perfect white teeth peeked through her smile.

Corbo handed her the zipped plastic bag, not wanting to let go of it.

Ms. Ida took the bag, opened it, and flipped through the pages. "Computers and such are down. Too bad everything was digitalized a few years ago. Otherwise, we'd have a better chance."

She glanced back up at him. "In the past, we have had about four hundred illegal immigrants here at a time. We don’t have many right now. I'll come around the corner to listen to your story." Ms. Ida handed the plastic bag back to Corbo.

In a few moments, she opened a small doorway, and waved him forward.

He followed her through the door, and they were ushered into a smaller, sterile room. A large oak table dominated the room, and a few colored pages scattered on the floor. He sat on the fake leather couch, with Livia beside him. A soldier stood at the door, watching, and listening.

Ms. Ida sat down, the large wooden table between them. "Okay. Go ahead."

Corbo glanced at the table. Dozens of initials dug deep into the wood. His finger traced an E. "I found out about my father a few months ago. My whole childhood, I grew up believing my aunt and uncle were my parents. Please help me find him."

Ms. Ida nodded, tapped the table, and waited.

Livia squeezed his arm.

Corbo gave her all the details he had, although they were sketchy. "I know it isn't much to go on. There is no knowing what name he may be registered under."

"What names could he be registered under?"

"His real name is Eduardo. He may be under my uncle's name of Jon, or something else, maybe."

"Okay. Corporal Eagle Eye admits knowing you. General Nord said you might come this way."

"You know General Nord?"

"Yes, communications are limited. However, he was afraid we'd shoot on sight, not to mention this is the heaviest guarded section of the state. Without our assistance right now, your life wouldn't be worth much."

"Thanks," Corbo said. "Can you help?"

She glanced at him and Livia. "Try to say thank you to him, if you ever see him again. Now, let's see what we can do."

Ms. Ida stood up and went to the door. "I'll bring you some water, and check a few things first." The woman turned to leave.

"Can I use a restroom?" Livia asked. "I've been stressed lately."

"Come along. It's that door there. The guard will watch you both. I'll be back soon," the woman said.

Corbo reviewed the pages more closely than he ever had before. He held the locket in his hand, and squeezed it, as if hoping to find some answer hidden deep within.

A strange noise like coughing, or choking echoed down the hall.

The guard didn't move.

Corbo pulled the pages closer. The date the papers had been approved was clearly marked, a few months before his birth. The approval process was far simpler twenty years ago than today. It was a full generation, a lifetime for him.

Livia slipped back in beside him, paler than before. She carried two water bottles.

"You okay?"

"Breakfast didn't agree with me. It hasn't for a few days. I was hungry this morning."

He hugged her. "Hope you feel better soon."

"I do, being beside you." Livia patted his hand and pulled the pages to her. "Anything we missed here?"

"I don't think so."

The guard coughed.

An elderly man peeked around the doorway.

"Hello? Corbo?"

Corbo's heart leapt. This couldn't be his father, could it?

The man walked in and around the table. He sat down. "I'm known as Chaplain Greg here. Maybe I can help you."

"Can you find my dad?"

"Tell me your story," the man said.

Corbo told his story. This time he mentioned the date on the pages.

"I may know someone. We have two people here from around the time of the raid you mentioned. One of them may know your father."

Corbo wanted to jump up, run around the table, and hug the man.

"Can we see them?"

Chaplain Greg held up his hand. "Not so fast. The usual red tape cutting wouldn't work. With General Nord's permission, and request, you will meet them. Jonny was hurt again, in a riot here right after the power went out. We can go see him. He may not be able to communicate. He is recovering with the best medicine we have available right now."

Chaplain Greg stood up. "You must be aware, there is little chance either man will know your father. Are you sure you want to get your hopes up?"

"We have to," Livia whispered. "For Corbo. And my mom. I promised."

"Stay strong. Come with me," Chaplain Greg said.

They followed the chaplain down the candle-lined hallway. The soldier followed behind them. He turned down another hall, past more doors. At last, he stopped and waited.

"This man is named Jonny. He was found without identification, and has never remembered his true name. His head was bashed in, and no one expected him to live. He used to talk in Spanish, primarily. Until a few weeks ago, his English had greatly improved. We went through a lengthy process to have him accepted as a citizen, and to work here with us."

Corbo waited. This could be the moment. This Jonny could know his dad. This might even be his dad. He had to find a way to reach into his mind.

Chaplain Greg opened the door.

Corbo took a deep breath and looked in. At first, he saw nothing other than darkness. His eyes adjusted. A pale sheet covered the outline of a body.

Chaplain Greg walked toward the form with a candle in his hand.

Corbo gritted his teeth, clutched the packet of letters in one hand, the locket in the other, and walked through the door.

Chapter 41

Perry Oklahoma to Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma

Amber sang nursery rhymes to Tam and Joe as she helped them prepare to leave in the morning. The word from the soldiers was to expect the normal three hour, two hundred mile trip, to take double that. With a supervolcano about to erupt a little over one thousand miles away, and the not so slumbering one in New Mexico, anywhere on the continent was a dangerous place to be. She didn't want to worry Tam and Joe about something no one had any control over.

Worry lines appeared on Tam's forehead. "Will we see the explosion?"

"You aren't supposed to know." Amber held her finger to her lips and glancing at Joe.

"We heard. Will we?"

Amber took the little girl into her arms, resting her head on her shoulder.

Tam waited for an answer.

"Dear child, we won't see Yellowstone's explosion. I don't think we will see anything at first. Maybe, not at all. Dust and ash may cover large parts of the planet afterwards. Then we may have really beautiful sunsets."

"What else."

Amber stared off into space, not seeing, or hearing, the bustling around her.

"There will be noise, loud booms. We will hear them." She snuggled Tam closer as Joe crawled over to them.

"Will the earth shake again?" Joe asked.

The shaking could be bad, as the eastern part of the continent, over four-fifths, ripped away from the western fifth. California might not fall into the ocean. With volcanoes on both sides, it could become a drifting island and would drift away, northwest, over the next few millennia.

"Come on, let's go," Alex said. "It's going to be a long trip. "

She wiped her eyes, and sat Tam down.

Tam and Joe grabbed their bags, and ran to the vehicle.

Alex helped Amber up, holding Ellie to the side.

"They know," she said.

He laughed. "Like we could keep it from them when the booms occur, or the ash falls."

"Do you think any will reach this far?"

"Depends on the winds. At least a little. We may not notice it," Alex said. "The sky is clear right now."

He hugged her close as they walked to the vehicle.

They rode in silence for a few hours. Holding on to each other and the children as the vehicle traversed back part of the way they had come the day before. Potholes were everywhere. Soon, they turned south. Before long, they reached an area where the pavement was wet.

"Looks like rain came through here. That's good," Monty said. "We'll be in Perry before long. A quick stop there, and then on to Oklahoma City."

A line of trees in the distance leaned, as if they had been shoved aside by giant's hands swiping across the plains. The sun blazed. Shimmering water retreated as fast as they drove across the pavement. The tree's leaves and trunks appeared to be trying to right themselves, reaching upward. Limbs pointed the opposite way of how they had grown. It would take months, or years, to reach the new path to sunlight.

After they passed the line of trees, Amber gasped at the devastation. Ahead were buildings, or former buildings. The remains of concrete, walls, and furnishings scattered across the landscape.

Monty stopped in front of a bed upright in the middle of the road.

Amber helped Tam and Joe out of the vehicle.

The scene was worse than the hospital after the earthquake. This wasn't earthquake damage, at least not in its finality.

She reached down and picked up a few splinters that lay on the ground.

Nearby, a board with an impaled giant ocean picture rested on the ground. Remnants of curtains, bedspreads, and papers fluttered on the ground, and in the low lying shrubs.

"A third of a mile of destruction." Alex pulled her close. "Tornadoes are deadly here. Hope no one was around."

The soldiers from the vehicles walked through the remains scattered about the road.

"We found something." One soldier shouted.

"What?"

"The driver from the third vehicle."

Amber turned her head into Alex's shoulder. Those men could be alive and loose, or dead, and buried in the rubble.

"Is he alive?" The driver said.

The soldier shook her head.

"Hurry, we need to be on the road."

"We have to check further."

Amber held Tam and Joe.

Alex stood nearby.

The soldiers argued. If the truck drivers had escaped, the people in Webb City should be informed.

She didn't want to wait to find out.

"Their leader is dead over here." Another soldier shouted. "No sign of the other two."

"Good. Everyone ready?" Monty climbed down off a hill of debris.

Amber breathed a sigh of relief.

Within minutes, they were back on the road, playing dodge the debris.

As they passed the former hotel foundations, she thought she saw a shadow move. It could have been nothing more than the wind waving a partially caught curtain or bedspread. It sent tingles up her spine.

The road showed signs of the strain the earth was under. Buckling in places, with local waterways and reservoirs either drained, or out of their banks. They passed over two small streams that covered the roadway.

Oklahoma City stretched out in front of them.

Monty slowed down, and picked through the abandoned vehicles, alert for raiders, and sudden changes in road condition.

Amber's nerves were as on edge as everyone's. She watched out the window with Tam and Joe's help. No people had been seen, which was a good thing, perhaps. No major signs of looting. Many

cars had their hoods lifted. Amber saw movement behind a semi and pointed.

As the driver crept by, a flock of vultures ascended from a small dog carcass. Everyone took a deep breath of relief. Sad for the dog, glad it wasn't raiders.

"We'll reach the major river soon," the driver said. "Not sure what we will find."

As they approached the bridge, the number of vehicles abandoned increased. Stalled vehicles blocked the bridge entrance. They could go no further in the southbound lanes.

Monty stopped and walked back to the other vehicle.

Within moments, they backed up. Monty hurried back. He pulled the vehicle across the median, and drove southbound on the shoulder of the vehicle-littered northbound lanes. At the bridge, Monty stopped the vehicle.

Everyone else got out to walk across. The bridge appeared stable. Constant strain from the weight of the abandoned vehicles, especially a wide load carrying a giant piece of heavy metal, could have weakened the supports. As they walked, damage to the southbound bridge became more visible. It could collapse anytime. No water flowed between the two segments of bridge.

Amber held Ellie, and kept Tam and Joe in front of her. She tried to smile, hoping they wouldn't notice her fear.

Once they reached the other side, and were well out of the way, Monty drove across, weaving between vehicles.

The bridge creaked and groaned. It shook and swayed.

He made it across, and on down the road.

The second driver crept up to the edge of the bridge. He followed Monty's pattern.

The bridge let out a loud crack.

Amber closed her eyes and pulled Tam and Joe to her so they couldn't watch.

Wind whistled by her, as the thunder of the bridge collapsed in front of her. Particles of dust and debris hit her skin. The sound of crashing metal and concrete resounded off the dry riverbed below.

"He made it," Alex said.

"Did you see the bridge push the back end up, as it hit the vehicle before falling?"

Everyone was clamoring, and glad both vehicles made it across. There would be no going back from here either.

As they scrambled back into the vehicles clapping and cheering, Amber was glad the ride was almost over. Soon, she could rest and find her bearings. Her old dreams were shattered. She needed to find new ones.

Ellie cried.

"Hush Ellie, we'll be there soon." Amber rocked the baby, and she quieted down.

Alex reached over and patted Ellie's cheek.

"The kids have been so good. Maybe we can stay at the next base for a while."

Amber shifted her backpack. "I hope for a place without so much concrete. A place we can grow food, homes, and a future."

"Growing homes? Now that is a concept. How can we grow our homes?"

Amber laughed. "Not sure. People used to use recyclable materials to make homes. When a home fell apart, they could burn the debris for heat the next winter. Couldn’t do that with modern homes."

"Suppose not. All the chemicals would make a toxic cloud."

"Part of the use once, and throw away culture. Thing is, there's nowhere to throw it away anymore."

"We'll find a way." Alex squeezed her shoulder.

A group of about thirty soldiers met them at the base gates. At first, the din of voices was too high to understand the conversations going on.

Ellie cried and yowled as Amber grabbed the bags, including the one with the last few cans of formula.

Diana, a visibly pregnant soldier, wobbled up to Amber and reached out for Ellie. "Hi Amber, what happened?"

Amber held Ellie close, not letting her go. "Tired. Need to make formula for her." Diana was one of Dena's many nieces. The wedding in Elmore City seemed so long ago now. It had settled so far back, like her memory of Livia, Karen, and even her mom. Would time ever move normally again?

"Come on, I'll show you around," Diana said.

Before long, they were seated in a cafeteria with the infant settling for her formula.

"At least she eats well."

"Her mom died giving birth to her. Her name was Kelly," Amber said.

"At least she found someone who can care for her."

"On the road, it's tough. I'm about out of formula. No idea where to find more." Amber nodded to the bag on the table.

"If you leave her with me, I'll take care of her."

"I can't leave her. Tam and Joe, orphans also, take good care of her." Amber adjusted Ellie as she slurped the bottle.

"My baby is due in a few days. I'm going to the ranch soon. It's all the family I have left. Aunt Dena would take us all in."

"What about your job here?"

Amber burped Ellie.

"They are going to send us somewhere, that's all I know. I can't go, because of my baby. If you could take mine and feed them both, then I might have to. Since you can't, I can go home to my aunt."

"That would be wonderful," Amber said. "It was so nice there. I didn't want to leave. With the latest news, I don't want to be any further west, or north, than I have to be."

Diana put her hand on Amber's. "I don't blame you. Let me find out if I can go with you."

"Monty would have to go out of the way, then."

"That's okay. We have plenty of vehicles, and enough fuel, for our group to make it there."

Alex walked into the room with Tam and Joe. "You two go eat a snack. We'll be leaving soon."

"Diana wants to come with us, and go back to Elmore City."

"A good reason to go there." He carried a tray of food over from the prep area.

"Our food is about to run out, that's the last of it." Diana returned and sat down.

"We'll find more." Alex took a big bite of vegetables. He chewed, swallowed, and said, "About half this group will be sent to Tuttle. The other half will go on with us. I'm sure they won't mind a short stopover."

Amber laughed. "They'll scare poor Dena. She'll think they are coming to take her check."

Alex gazed deep into her eyes before. "At least they can tell her there won't be any more checks. Maybe she'll believe them." He stuffed another bite into his mouth.

Chapter 42

Tinker Air force Base to Elmore City, Oklahoma

Alex snuggled up next to Amber, and listened as Diana told stories about the base, and her life before the quakes began. It all sounded so simple. Fix and fly planes, practice maneuvers, and enemy target search. Now, bombing the enemy would only make the situation worse. And, where would anyone start? Yellowstone, Valles Caldera, and hundreds of ruptured earthquake faults were the enemy now.

Monty pulled up in front of the house and circle of travel trailers. They were five vehicles now, instead of three.

Naomi ran around from the back of the house. She screamed, and fell to the ground.

Alex leaped out and grabbed her. "It's okay. It's me. See, Amber is here."

Amber stepped out carrying Ellie. "It's okay. Where is your mom?"

Naomi, still on the ground, pointed to the house.

The whole group they had left behind stood there, except Dena.

"It's okay." Amber stood up. "I need to see Dena. Diana is with me."

Dena stepped out through the door. She ambled through the crowd.

Diana stood by the vehicle door.

Dena ran to her, hugged her, and cried.

After a few moments, Dena stood back holding Diana's shoulders. "Come on around, you all must be starving. George will have to feed you all."

George laughed. "Come along."

They trooped behind the house. Brick corners had been erected, with a large wall positioned across the top. It was high enough to walk under. A fireplace was at one end, tables and chairs clustered all around.

"Sorry there aren't enough seats," Dena said. "We don't expect much company."

"Will there be enough food?" Amber asked.

"No," Dena said. "There aren't any more pans, either. So two choices. Do you want to eat a partial plate now, and a second later? Or eat in two shifts?"

The families and the soldiers waited, watching each other. Monty stepped up. "I think most of us would like to have a snack now, and eat more later. Perhaps Diana, Alex, and a few others who suffered serious injury a few days back may need to eat more now, and a snack later. We have food to add to the soup."

Alex groaned. "I'm mostly better Dena. I, and few others, were hit with tear gas. Diana needs her strength."

"My baby and I'll last as long you," Diana said.

Dena laughed. "Well then, it's settled. Everyone, bring what you can. We need to feed the kids. We adults have enough fat to tide us over. It'll take an hour or so."

People chatted as the food cooked.

Tam and Joe played with the children of the community Dena was building from her relatives and friends. They ran back to check on Amber and Ellie from time to time.

Dena had held baby Ellie and pronounced her perfect for a newborn.

"Kids, time to eat!" Dena ladled out soup into the available bowls. She made sure the smallest kids had enough to fill them, as they might fall asleep before a second batch was ready. Her laughter and smiles lit up the makeshift patio. Tam and Joe ran to join the other children at a long wooden table made from old doors.

"Amber, it's been wonderful since you all were here," Dena said. "I've had so much fun. Only working a few hours a day." She glanced at the soldiers.

Alex went over to Monty. "Can you talk to Dena? She is terrified of losing her check if she does any work."

He laughed. "She's doing plenty now. This soup sure tastes good."

"I know. That's the problem. She's the cook. Her immune disorder, she worries."

"I'll put her mind at ease. If checks ever start back up, no report of what is going on here will be made." Monty stood up, and walked to where Dena helped prepare the next batch of soup. It wouldn't be much. No one knew how much food there was at the moment.

George came over. "We've took apart a few of the abandoned houses. The ones in the worst condition. And, we've planted crops in a nearby field. I know where a few are that will be ready to harvest soon too."

"It'll help," Alex said.

"You don't think there will be trouble?" George stacked the children's empty plates.

"No. I don't think anyone is coming back." Alex handed Goldie a scrap of vegetable.

"I think Dena knows. I hope so," George said.

Alex reached out his hand. "Is the community strong here?"

"Sure is. Hope it stays that way." George looked off in the distance.

"So do I."

"You haven't said much about your trip." He wiped the crumbs off the table.

Alex sat his empty bowl down. "The news isn't good. I don't want to worry people. There is nothing they can do to change anything, or fix it."

Tam ran up. "Why is the stone yellow? And what is it doing?"

A sudden hush swept across the open-air room.

Everyone waited on him.

Alex stood up. "My friends, we brought Diana home."

He pulled Tam close to his side. "Amber and I hope to stay here as well, with the three orphans we found."

The gathered families and soldiers nodded and smiled.

"We brought bad news as well. Yellowstone has seen a sudden pressure change, due to the folds here, and in New Mexico."

A few women gasped, and men closed their eyes.

"The good news is; an eruption now would not be near as terrible as one in the future. The bad news is; it may rip the continent further apart."

"We should be safe here?" James, Dena's brother, asked.

"Safer than those who didn't stay."

A few women cried as they realized people they knew, family, friends, and co-workers, would never come home from the evacuation camps.

"We have a lot to do to prepare this place for winter. And, build homes for myself and Amber, as well as Diana, and anyone else living in a travel trailer."

The families cheered.

"Of course."

"You are welcome."

"We can have a place up in a few days. Then the other homes soon," George said. "Cannibalizing from falling apart neighbor homes what we need, if the soldiers agree."

"We all have to do what has to be done to survive right now," Monty said.

As the group settled back down Amber came over to him, hugged him and said, "Thank you everyone. Tam and Joe have been a wonderful help to us, and will be a great addition to the community. Ellie will have a place to call home."

"What about the soldiers?"

Monty laughed. "We will stay tonight. Then, we have to go on to Fort Sill. Good luck to everyone here. Alex and Amber will be missed. We know where to find you, if we need you."

"Can you send Fortune and Crispy to us? They stayed with the cowherd at Alma with Sharon, Mary, and Ralph."

"Sure can," Monty said. "Who knows, maybe traveling cowboys will become popular, for a while anyway."

The soldiers, Amber, and Alex settled down for the night under the pavilion. Coyotes called in the distance.

"I wish I knew where Karen and Tom are," Alex said.

"I know. I worry about them too." Amber snuggled closer.

There would be no privacy tonight, maybe soon.

Alex felt a low vibration deep inside his head. It grew larger and louder.

He jumped up, grabbed Amber, and yelled, "Let's go."

Before long, everyone stood shaking, outside the shelter. Another boom, and the ground shifted a bit.

"Yellowstone erupted." Or, perhaps Valles Caldera. Alex turned away.

"Do you think the shelter is safe?"

"Check the supports," Alex said.

Amber ran for her bag. It was dark, and the stars were visible, except a few in one small corner. She pulled out her pillowcase,

shook it out, and held it over the dying fire embers. "I should draw the changes in."

Alex reached for a charred stick from the fireplace. He took the pillowcase and drew a few lines, placing a few more dots along the way. "I think it looks like this."

He took her in his arms and held her close. "We will never know. Someday, maybe our descendants will."

"I miss my mom and Dr. Rebecca. I even miss Corbo and Livia. We never did find them."

He held her close. "They may be safe. I wonder if my dad and Dr. Evan made it to Yellowstone in time? They only had two days."

"They may have," Amber said. "We can hope."

One of the new soldiers came over. "You know a Livia and Corbo?"

"Yes," Alex said.

"I have some news." The soldier then told Alex about them making it to the ranger station, and the plan to release the wild animals.

"I wish I had thought of that," Amber said.

The soldier laughed. "You were busy corralling new wild animals. Don't worry, the ones close to the bases are being released, or already have been. Diana planned the release of the Oklahoma City Zoo."

"That's great. I always thought Livia was smart, and would live up to any cause she wanted."

"I never met her. She made quite the impression on General Nord."

"I'd say so." Alex laughed. "I think Amber will have the longest lasting impression."

"Hardly," Amber said.

"Truly. You are calm, sweet, and build everything in your path. That will be remembered long after we are gone." Alex hugged her close.

"I'm going to leave you two love birds alone." The soldier walked off.

Alex reached over to kiss Amber, and enjoyed how she relaxed in his arms. Maybe a short walk, beyond the house would be nice. He reached for a lighted stick from the fireplace; a little light to

scare off the wild animals. They couldn't wander far, or they might become lost.

She held his hand as he led her off from the group, clutching the pillowcase close.

"It's all I have of my family, my past."

"We'll bury it somewhere safe. Somewhere you can always find it." He bent over and kissed her.

Alex found a nice quiet spot. He sat down, and pulled her into his lap, and kissed her forehead.

Amber tried to say something.

He kissed her lips and whispered, "Later."

Chapter 43

Florence, Arizona

Livia walked into the tiny room behind Corbo.

It was too dark to see well. Chaplain Greg picked up a candle in the hallway, and carried it in with him.

The man on the bed shifted position. The sweat on his face shone in the candle light. Eyes opened, then flickered shut. Hands grasped the sheet, and he rolled back over, toward the wall.

"Jonny, this young man thinks he may be your son. Do you have a child who would be an adult?"

The man did not respond.

Corbo stood, rooted to the spot, barely breathing.

Livia reached for his hand. "Let me try."

She sat beside the bed and reached out to the man. "Jonny, what is your real name? Who are you?"

He groaned as he rolled back over. His face was blank of emotion.

The face that greeted Livia made her want to jump back. She didn't dare offend him. The eyes were sunken in their sockets, one cheekbone was missing, and the cave in around his mouth indicated many teeth were missing as well. His face was so bruised, she couldn't tell which were old, and which were new injuries.

Livia patted the bedside. "Please, we want to help."

The man grunted and one hand moved out from under the covers. He lifted Livia's chin. He made a sound, let go of her chin, and peered up at Corbo. "Na."

Jonny glanced at Chaplain Greg.

"Can you leave us the candle, and step out in the hall?" Livia said to Chaplain Greg.

"Normally no. However, in this case, a few minutes is okay," he said.

Chaplain Greg handed the candle to Corbo. His boots resounded on the floor, and out the door.

Corbo sat down beside Livia.

Livia glanced from Corbo to Jonny on the bed. "Eduardo?"

The man opened his eyes wide and groaned.

Livia leaned closer. "Were you Eduardo's friend?"

The man opened his eyes and flicked his lashes up and down. He lifted his arm and brushed Livia's cheek.

"Mom never mentioned him having a friend go with him, maybe he did."

"She may not have known," Corbo said. "Jonny, do you know my dad?"

The man looked from one to the other, and touched their faces. Something about both of them had sparked a buried memory. His eyes shone. He spoke no more words.

"I wish I could reach in, and hear what your brain is thinking. What are seeing? What are you hearing? Did you know mom?"

His eyes were large. The man glanced at them both, though the effort exhausted him. His eyes almost closed.

"Are you okay in there?" Chaplain Greg asked outside the door.

"Sure. A moment more." Livia looked at the sunken face, the withered hands, the wasted, broken body. Nothing like Corbo. No resemblance to his Aunt Anna either. She touched the man's hand. "I'm Livia. I have to go now." She stood, took the candle, and packet of papers.

Corbo stood up.

The man reached out and touched her belly. There was a smile on his face.

Her weight gain hadn't really registered before. It had been too gradual. Her pregnancy would be visible to some now, at least in this outfit.

The man rolled over and faced the wall, drawing the covers over his head.

Livia's cheeks burned as she walked out into the hallway carrying the candle.

"Not him?"

"No. No resemblance to Corbo, or his aunt. Something touched him, or a memory. He seemed to recognize something about both of us. His eyes shone. Maybe Corbo's dad took a friend with him?"

"Could be." Chaplain Greg walked down the hall. "It would have been safer to go alone. Sometimes alone, you are more alert; and less likely to be ambushed."

Livia handed Corbo the packet of papers and took his other hand.

"I'm not sure about anything right now," Corbo said.

Chaplain Greg stopped at a corner. "I won't say a word about your religious choices, or beliefs," he whispered. "What I will say is Jonny has been known to predict many things without words. Upcoming babies and troubles are his usual predictions."

"Trouble abounds lately."

"What trouble, and what blessings, have you brought with you?"

"Yellowstone is the trouble now," Corbo said.

"Thought as much. Did you bring a blessing to?" He glanced at Livia.

Her face reddened. The heat burned. Her breathing became difficult. The candle almost slipped out of her hand and the chaplain caught it.

"It's okay. Sometimes better to wait and be sure. The next man isn't scheduled to work today. He may be in the next building."

Livia squeezed Corbo's hand as Chaplain Greg turned away.

The chaplain opened the door and they walked outside.

It was hot. The sun reverberated off the roof, and several metal pieces lying loose on the ground.

Livia fanned her face as she avoided the debris between the buildings.

"We had some wind the other day, and no one here to fix things. They are going to move most of the prisoners out of here soon."

"Where too?" Corbo moved a piece of what looked like a mobile home roof.

"One of the larger state prisons. They are trying to figure how to bring everyone together. The better to feed and guard them."

"And the easier for uprisings," Livia said.

"They know that. I don't know their plan, or how they intend to implement it," Chaplain Greg said.

"What about Jonny, and the other man who may be my dad?"

"Since both work here, and live in the immigrant community behind the fence, they'll stay here. Jonny may stay in the building for a while, until, and if, he can walk and talk again."

"Would my papers prove who my dad is?"

"I wish. Thing is, even in good times, it could be a ten-year court battle, and it would be tough to prove that those papers should have been with him twenty years ago," Chaplain Greg said.

"So, no way to prove who he, or I, am then," Corbo said.

"It's not so bad. I think things are changing, and it won't matter anymore," Chaplain Greg said.

"It won't come soon enough," Corbo said. "I want to stay here. I always thought I was born here, and it was shock to find out otherwise."

"Chaplain."

Four soldiers rounded the corner between the buildings.

"We need to move the prisoners. We need your help to document. Any luck for these two?"

"Not yet. Taking them to Grandfather Leanardo in the village."

"Not today. We are clearing out the first building, and we need your help. Give them directions. They may find him there."

"I'm sorry." Chaplain Greg gave them a street address and rushed for the door of another building. He fumbled with his keys and didn't glance back.

"Where is the village?" Livia asked.

"On the other side of that building, on Palo Verde Lane," the soldier said.

Livia took Corbo's hand. "Guess we better go. Many people left there?"

"Quite a few." The soldier opened the gate. "Good luck."

They walked through the opening in the fence.

"Well, at least we won't forget the name," Corbo said.

"Nope. The dry dusty day will wear us out. Will we go back to base tonight?"

"Or stay in the immigrant camp." Corbo squeezed her hand.

The heat from his smile was almost as overpowering as the sun's rays glaring down on them.

Her first sight of the immigrant camp was one of defeat. At first glance, it appeared depilated, deserted, and sad. A place where hope no longer lived. Trash, metal sheets, and small animals, littered the open street.

They looked both ways, trying to decide where people might be. They turned left at the first road, and then turned right down the next unnamed street.

An elderly man and a skinny dog rested on a shaded porch.

Livia squeezed Corbo's hand and walked up to him. "How long have you been here?"

The man glanced at her. "Today, or long term?"

"Well, long term, I guess. Where is everyone?"

The man laughed. "Most are inside, napping. Been here a long time. Many years."

Livia waved at the mess on the road around her. "Has it always looked like this?"

"No. Homes being dismantled for fuel here, and at prisons."

Livia sat beside the older man, and patted the dog. The dog glanced at her. "You stay?"

"Have to. Nowhere to go."

"No hope?"

"Hope, yes." The man's eyes shone. "Brother dies. New world opens. I can rest."

The pain this man must be feeling. Livia wanted to reach out to him. She wasn't sure how he would react. Cultural differences were so strong in tiny multicultural villages.

"Corbo and I are searching for his father. Can you help us? Chaplain Greg sent us to find Grandfather Leanardo."

After a glance at Corbo, the man coughed. "Not sure I know him. Come inside. Eat a bit, nap a bit, and talk. Village will wake in a few hours."

The elderly man pulled himself up.

Livia stood up.

The dog lazily stretched into a standing position.

Maybe there weren't any answers.

This man may know Corbo's father. She'd have to wait and listen on his terms. At least they could rest out of the blazing sun until the other inhabitants woke up from their afternoon naps.

Chapter 44

Florence, Arizona

Corbo followed the elderly man, his dog, and Livia into the house.

At first, it appeared dark, after the sun's glare outside. Within moments, he could see. Metal sheets were placed around the room. Similar to mirrors, they illuminated the area as well as possible through the un-curtained window.

They sat on the floor. The elderly gentleman passed them cups of fried beans with a little cornmeal sprinkled on top.

After eating, the man leaned back against a stack of pillows. "Tell me your story."

Corbo felt as if he had always been telling his story. Each time, he hoped it would bring him one-step closer to his father. This man might be able to help. Or, at least be entertained by a story so similar to those he had heard many times before.

The man nodded several times during the re-telling. His eyes closed, and one hand rested on the dog's head. One time, the man opened them enough to glance around at Livia and him. Otherwise, he appeared unaffected.

"So that's why I'm here," Corbo said.

"Good story. Nap a bit. When my neighbors wake up, we'll go." The man stretched out and snored.

So much for quickly finding his father.

Corbo rested with his eyes half open.

Before long, the metal sun catchers no longer glowed. A peaceful dimness loomed.

Sounds of dogs barking, chickens clucking, and children laughing woke him.

Livia sat beside him petting the dog.

The old man was gone.

"We're to wait here a few more minutes," Livia said.

Soon the old man entered the house followed by Kestrel.

"Good to see you. Are you staying here tonight?" Kestrel said.

"We can. We don't want to go back to the base. They may not have room for us, if they haven't forgotten us," Corbo said.

"That's fine," Kestrel said. "I didn't know you knew my uncle. I'm on duty at the Immigrant Detention Center tonight. Let me know, if you need me."

"Thanks," Corbo said.

"Good. We'll have a meeting after dark. Stay here till then, unless you want to explore," the older man said.

"We'd like to walk around a bit, if that's okay," Livia said.

"Sure, go ahead. The adults will be busy, and the kids tend to run wild these days. Be careful." Kestrel said. "Uncle and I have much to discuss."

Outside, the sun's rays slanted, heating the rocks before the chill of the desert night began. Men and women stacked burnable furniture, and other items onto the metal squares, and used them as sleds to drag the scraps along the street. Children, dogs, and chickens stirred up dust devils as they fluttered loudly about in the dusty street.

Livia laughed as a small careless child almost ran into her while tossing balls with friends.

The evening passed as they met and talked to people. The villagers gathered together around a small bonfire where food cooked slowly, in the ancient ways. Livia watched the women, and offered to help them. They shooed her away as if she were a pesky fly, or a tumbling toddler.

"They can't say you didn't try," Corbo said.

"This place is fun. Everyone is so happy."

"I saw their laughter stop, and the kids hid, when the soldiers drove by earlier," Corbo said.

"An uneasy truce. I'm glad they welcomed us." She squeezed his hand and gazed into his eyes.

One woman shouted at someone. The babble of voices in many languages lowered as the people gathered in a line. They picked up bowls out of pile on a board as they reached the cook fires. Corbo and Livia joined near the end, with children jockeying behind them, pushing them forward into the adults.

The noisy meal was soon over. Children and dogs frolicked, and cats hissed or hid. A woman stood up behind the fire and beckoned. The old man, and his dog toddled to her.

"We're asked to help find the father of visitors," the man said.

The crowd murmured.

"See. Think?"

The men and women left an open space around Livia and Corbo. Murmurs in a dozen languages began. Fingers wagged. Soon everyone focused on the elderly man, and nodded.

"Let them stay until tomorrow Grandfather Leanardo. We will plan," a voice in the crowd said.

"Come Corbo, Livia. Stay tonight." He hobbled off toward his home.

Corbo took a deep breath, and they followed.

"What do they think?" Livia asked.

Grandfather Leanardo waited until they were in the home. Even in the dark, the metal sheets gave a little light.

"They will help," he said.

The man settled down and drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

"I hope they can find him," Livia said.

The man snored in reply.

Corbo pulled Livia close. He drifted into an uneasy sleep and woke with Livia sitting up beside him.

"You okay?"

"An upset stomach. Been that way a few days. All the stress." Livia bent over him. He could easily lose himself in her lovely eyes. She had grown more attractive over the last few months. Even her personality had smoothed, no longer so crusty around the edges.

"Come on. Let's go," Livia reached for his hand.

"What about breakfast?"

"We'll eat later. We have to try to meet Grandfather Leanardo before the soldiers arrive there to empty his building." She pulled his arm.

They reached the building to find Chaplain Greg waiting for them. "Glad you're here early. Yesterday afternoon was a mess."

"What happened?"

The chaplain pulled out his keys to unlock the door. "Too many people moved. More families broken up."

"Their families are in this village, right?"

"Yes, most of them." Chaplain Greg pulled the door open, and ushered them inside.

Livia stepped in the door. She grabbed Corbo's hand and dragged him forward.

The locket grasped in his hand, and papers at his chest, Corbo stepped into the room.

On the floor lay a mat covered with a sheet. Beside it sat Kestrel, and Grandfather Leanardo.

"Sit," Kestrel said.

The locket chain slipped between his fingers. Corbo clutched it tightly, holding his hopes and dreams in his heart. He sat next to Livia on the hard floor.

"They are bringing my father to die," Kestrel said.

Could this man they were bringing to die on the floor, be his father?

Two soldiers carried a stretcher into the room and placed it on the white sheet. Jonny was on it. His eyes glazed, each breath more shallow than the last.

"I too, was searching for my father," Kestrel said. "I found him at last."

Kestrel took the dying man's hands in his. "I wish I had found you sooner. You went in search of my aunt and soon to be cousin, and never came home."

Livia gasped.

Corbo took a deep breath, as he raised the clenched locket to his chest.

"My father, who is he?"

Grandfather Leanardo held out his hand. "Let me see your locket."

Corbo clutched it tighter to his chest. He didn't want to let it go.

He reached across the dying Jonny to hand the locket to Grandfather Leanardo.

The man took the locket, and opened it. He handed it to Kestrel.

"Yes uncle, it is a match."

Corbo was confused. They family dynamics he was seeing fall into place were unexpected, and difficult to figure out.

Chaplain Greg spoke. "Grandfather Leanardo, is that your real name?"

"Yes. And no. My brother-in-law, now known as Jonny, was nearly killed in the border conflict. I came here to see him, after I received the letter that my wife died. I knew there was a son named Corbo. The letter had a bullet through the pages, and I had no idea if he was alive, or dead," the man said.

The old man rocked on his heels. The pictures in the locket held his gaze. "Livia, I hope your mother is as beautiful as always."

"I guess so. Never thought of her as beautiful," Livia said.

"If I had known for sure you were alive. I would have searched for you."

He handed the locket back to Corbo. "I stayed with my brother-in-law, and helped him. There was no chance he would remember his name, or family. I never mentioned his real name. When I would speak his name, or mine, he became dangerously agitated. So, I took my middle name, and became a grandfather to the population when I should have been a father. I am sorry."

"I never knew," Kestrel said. "You sent letters home. You never said anything."

"I did. To your mother. She wanted the best for you. And, you had a purpose, to save what you could of your father's traditions. She is proud of you. Keep up the good work."

The man on the floor groaned, and Kestrel turned to him. Jonny, as he had been known so many years, drew his last breath.

"Corbo, please forgive me, and I hope we can rebuild the family we should have had. I guess, I always hoped Jon and Anna would come here. If they had been arrested and brought through here, I would have known. And then, if you'd been with them, I would have found you. It was the only option I knew. I had no idea where to find them."

The older man held out his hand to Corbo.

Corbo's head spun with thoughts and feelings, much as it had that day in Livia's mom's deli. It was too much to know what was happening.

"I don't know you. How can I call you Dad?"

"You don't have to. I have another name here," the old man said.

"Come. We must bury Jonny before midday," Chaplain Greg said.

Grandfather Leanardo rocked backward. "No. The council will decide if he is to be buried, or cremated. With the recent news, we must form a more coherent community. It will no longer be Mexicans beside Tohono O'odham, beside Americans of every descent, and every other nationality represented in our village. We

will form a coherent whole, and develop living, and dying, practices together."

"As you wish. Is there anything I can help with?" Chaplain Greg said.

"Yes, tomorrow. Corbo, Livia, will you be joining us?" Grandfather Leanardo said.

This man, his uncle had died. He had said one word to Corbo. He put the locket in his pocket. "I will help carry him, if that is okay with Kestrel?"

Kestrel nodded, tears in his eyes from the death of the father he barely remembered.

"Uncle, will my father's people be lost now?"

Grandfather Leanardo patted his hands. "No. They will recover. Here, we will build a new nation. If the local band that moved near this community soon after your father came here choose to join us, they may. Come, we will move Jonny's broken remains."

Grandfather Leanardo stood, moved to the feet of the dead man, and gave one hand to both Kestrel and Corbo.

The rest of the day blurred for Corbo as the community met to determine the best funeral practices for their future. In the end, the village determined to cremate Jonny as the sun sank the following day.

Corbo and Kestrel worked together throughout the day searching the remaining empty homes and business for potential fuel sources. They would have to work together now, and build a hope and future. All the fuel couldn't be used before winter. Some items might be useful later, and should be saved.

By late afternoon, piles of debris were ready to set alight.

As the evening sun filtered along the horizon, the immigrant villagers walked and cried as they carried the body of the man, Jonny, who had cheered them, and made them laugh through many a long night. He had never known who he was, or cared. In some ways, he had been like an overgrown child to the community, taking not quite done food from cooking pots, and playing ball with young boys. At other times, he had known when and how to break the tension, and ease relations between the soldiers and the community. Without Jonny, someone new would have to fill the gap between the cultures.

The tears were real as the human shell with the sunken face, broken teeth, and withered hands was laid to rest on the pile. One woman stepped forward with a tattered woven blanket, and placed it gently across his body.

Grandfather Leanardo and Kestrel held the pole with the firebrand to light the death shroud. Chaplain Greg stood behind on the left, with Corbo and Livia on the right.

At last, the fire took hold, as the sun sank below the horizon. Women chanted and moaned in multiple languages.

The ground swayed and trembled.

The air reverberated with sound.

The waves knocked them to the ground.

Corbo grabbed Livia's hand and looked north, out over the funeral pyre. There in the distance was a light glow. It lasted a second. That one second in time and space, predicted how their lives had changed forever. That glow might mean Yellowstone had erupted. He knew Yellowstone should be too far off to see. It could also be one of the volcanoes they had passed in the San Francisco volcanic field. It was unlikely to see the glow form that distance either, unless the sky was clear enough. Of course, Yellowstone's eruption may have forced a new plume upwards, somewhere closer to Florence.

Even if he had Alex's knowledge, he would never abandon Livia to find out what was going on. It was too dangerous. He could die in a volcanic blast. Or, she could be hurt by raiders while he was gone. The truce between the village and the soldiers was so uneasy, it was safer to not take any chances. Their future child depended on both of them being alive and healthy. He pulled her close.

Perhaps Kestrel, or some of the other single people, could check out the local region before winter. They would need to search for local food sources, and abandoned farms anyway.

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Thanks!

Gail Brown

About the Author

Gail Brown began reading at far too young an age. Her preferred reading material was nonfiction, with biographies and science being at the forefront of her library excursions.

Her ability to memorize and use all the grammar rules in school years led to working in the school library while classmates caught up. All of those rules, and diagramming sentences was easy and relaxing. For many years. All forgotten now. Except the joyful memories of preparing the library for others to use.

Along the way, she found fiction and science fiction to help bring hope and light to a world of colorful dreams. A world where disability was accepted, people lived their lives without overwork and fear.

As an adult, gardening, and preparing the garden bounty, was her way to relax. To think. To make order out chaos.

Other Books by Gail Brown

Concurrent Earths

Concurrent Earths is collection containing 40 short stories of Earth, or almost Earth, that may, or may not, exist.

These stories reach to us across the stars. They share a thought, a dream, or a hope. Stories that touch the heart and soul.

Whether a single individual, a community, or a society, each story delves into specific situations, and how they might benefit society.

Or, how they might go wrong.

Very wrong.

Galataria's Echoes

Galataria survived the Devolution War generations ago. The human population saved the planet. Now they too are on the brink of extinction.

Memories of a war they have never seen cross the dimensional boundary to Kalara and Leonard.

At least, they think the dreams are nightmares of Galataria's past.

For Shalin and Jendal on Earth, the dreams are peaceful and serene. A beauty in life they have never seen.

Dreams bring a bit of both worlds across the unrecognized bridge into the other.

Galataria and Earth are threatened with ideas, and a life most don't recognize, and many fear.

Trails Series

Trails: Pit Miners

Pair 2, Book 1
Trails 3: Tales
Time: 200 years in the future

Pair 2, Book 2
Trails 4: Mines
Time: 210 years in the future

The middens of the ancestors slowly empty. The last few usable pieces are found.

Dangers forgotten emerge from the bottoms of the pit mines. Forgotten fears told as campfire tales.

Specters of the ancestors awaken.

The future of the Pit Miners, and the communities beyond that they barely know exist, are at risk.

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